COMBAT

Afghanistan 1979–89

Soviet Paratrooper VERSUS Mujahideen Fighter

David Campbell

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Introduction

The war in Afghanistan was a conflict that the Soviet Union never intended to fight. Forced to support an increasingly fractious communist government that was constantly calling for financial and military aid in its battle against its own rebellious people, the Soviet decision to invade was meant to stem the political instability that had developed in the wake of the 17 April 1978 Taraki coup and the subsequent murder of President Nur Muhammad Taraki on 14 September 1979 by his prime minister (and successor) Hafizullah Amin. The geopolitical situation, with a new-born revolutionary Islamic Republic in Iran and increasing American influence in Pakistan and in support of the Afghan Mujahideen, may well have made the choice to intervene more

Two guerrillas of the Afghan National Liberation Front at their Peshawar base, 21 January 1980. The Marxist coup and the subsequent Soviet invasion exacerbated natural fault-lines that already existed between the state's rural and urban populations, as the historian and Islamic expert Olivier Roy observed: 'For the peasant the state is alien, and the relationship between the peasantry and the state official is characterized by a profound and mutual contempt … there are really two Afghanistans: first there is the town (*shahr*), the place of innovation (*bid'at*); this is the natural environment of the civil servant, the teacher, the soldier and the communist, all "intellectuals" and "bare-heads" (*sar-luchak*), held to be unbelievers and arrogant; and secondly the province (*atraf*), the home of religion, tradition (*sunnat*) and values which stand the test of time' (Roy 1986: 10). (Moore/Evening Standard/Getty Images)

Soviet paratroopers at Kabul Airport, 1988. By the mid-1980s for most young men there was no romance or any sense of patriotic duty associated with service in the Red Army, certainly not for Vladislav Tamarov, who was to find himself serving with the paratroopers: 'We were drafted at age eighteen. We had no choice. If you weren't in college, if you weren't disabled, if your parents didn't have a lot of money – then you were required to serve. Some young men broke their legs, some paid money; I enrolled in college. I didn't want to waste two years of my life, especially since I knew what awaited me in the army. But when I was in my second year of college, they changed the law, and took me. "Anywhere but Afghanistan" my mom said when she saw me off' (Tamarov 2001: 16). (DOUGLAS E. CURRAN/AFP/ Getty Images)

urgent. Nevertheless, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was meant to be a limited operation of short duration, the military aspect of which would end as soon as stability was restored.

When it came on 27 December 1979, the Soviet attack was swift and deadly. Key sites in and around Kabul were seized, including the headquarters of KHAD (Khadamat-e Aetla'at-e Dawlati, the Afghan 'State Information Services'), the Ministry of the Interior, and President Hafizullah Amin's Taj Bek Palace; the president initially failed to realize that the hand around his throat was not that of his Afghan foe but of his Soviet friend, but by then it was far too late as his regime, like his life, was quickly extinguished. The *coup de main* was complete by the following morning, with motorized and airborne forces consolidating the takeover in the succeeding days by rapidly securing the country's strategic infrastructure.

The precision and speed with which Moscow dispatched Amin's troublesome government was impressive, but was no indicator of what lay ahead; the age-old problem of Afghanistan – that kicking in the door was relatively easy, but gaining control of the house was not – would play itself out again, arguably more as a result of Soviet strategic and tactical misadventures than of Afghan resistance. The seeds of Soviet failure were evident even before the invasion:

Afghanistan, 1980

MAP KEY

As it had done in the past, Afghanistan would prove to be a difficult land in which to wage a war, especially one so dependent on mechanized strength. The historian Rodric Braithwaite gives a sense of the hardships the Soviets would face there: 'The mountains which cover four-fifths of Afghanistan sweep from the Pamirs in the east, where Tajikistan, India, Pakistan, and China join, almost to the frontier with Iran beyond Herat in the west. They divide the country from north to south, and the people into different and often hostile groupings who speak different languages, have different cultures, and for much of history had different religions as well. They are pierced by valleys and defiles, which are negotiable by people on foot: local farmers and shepherds, merchants, smugglers, travellers, tourists, hippies, and guerrilla fighters with their caravans of weapons. Proper roads are a luxury; until the twentieth century there were little more than tracks, passable enough by men and pack animals, but not at all friendly to wheeled traffic' (Braithwaite 2011: 128). Afghanistan's most significant road was the highway that encircled the country and connected many of the larger cities such as Ghazni, Kandahar, Herat, Maimanah, Shibirghan and Mazar-i-Sharif with Kabul; leaving Kabul and heading northwards through the Salang Pass towards the Soviet border the road would prove to be the most important supply route for OKSVA, and thus became a constant target of the Mujahideen for the duration of the war. The fighting varied in frequency and intensity from region to region, and within regions as well, depending on the nature of the local resistance, the personalities and desires of regional warlords, and the objectives of the Soviet and Afghan government forces. Some areas, notably the Panjshir Valley, were hotbeds of insurrection that threw off all Soviet attempts to bring them to heel, while others offered the occupiers a relatively placid sojourn, though nowhere could be considered 'safe'. As the war dragged on the border with Pakistan would prove to be of critical importance: for the Mujahideen it was the lifeline through which their supplies came, a place of safety in times of hardship, and a perfect area in which to regroup and plan, and from which to stage large operations. For the Soviets, cutting the Afghan Mujahideen off from their Pakistani support networks would have been a major, possibly war-winning victory, but the length of the border, the incredibly difficult terrain that dominated almost its entire course, and the relative paucity of Soviet troops, meant that such a success was never a realistic prospect.

> The Chief of Soviet Ground Forces, General [of the Army Ivan Grigorevich] Pavlovsky, who commanded the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, led a group of 50 Soviet officers on a lengthy planning reconnaissance throughout Afghanistan during August through October 1979. But they failed to note that Afghanistan was in a civil war and that a coup de main would seize control only of the central government, not the countryside. (Dibb 2010: 497)

For the Soviets, there was little understanding that a solution similar to those exercised in Hungary and Czechoslovakia was never likely to work, not least because they did not appreciate that though Afghanistan may have been a state, it was far from a nation. The relatively nascent growth in the urban middle classes, most of whom were educated in Marxist theory and divorced from the traditional concerns of Afghan rural society, had provided the new blood for government departments, officers for the armed forces and staff for the growing bureaucracies that were attempting to transform the medieval nature of the country. Such change was to be achieved by breaking down the age-old system of local loyalties and patronage based on tribal, ethnic, social and religious groupings, reorienting the people towards reliance on a centralized communist state embodied by modern Kabul. The descent into civil war was in large part due to the violent refusal of Afghanistan's disparate communities to accede to Kabul's statist, communist diktats.

Afghan tribal warfare was fractious by its very nature, often made up of shifting alliances that were usually self-serving and short-lived, but the arrival

Amu Darya
UZBEKISTAN
TAJIKISTAN
USSR
PAMIRS
Pamir
Termez
Panj
Kokchah
WAKHAN CORRIDOR
FRIENDSHIP BRIDGE
JOWZAN
KUNDUZ
TURKMENISTAN
Shibirghan
Mazar-i-Sharif
Kunduz
BADAKHSHAN
TAKHAR
HINDU KUSH
BALKH
Kunar Sind
Maimanah
BAGHLAN
Kashmir
SAMANGAN
IRAN
FARYAB
SAR-E PUL
PANJSHIR
NURISTAN
SALANG TUNNEL
Khinj
Khost
Kunduz
Balkh
Bazarak
Asmar
Rukha
Morghab
BINSHAI PASS
Charikar
KAPISA
KUNAR
BADGHIS
BAMYAN
Bamyan
PARWAN
LAGHMAN
Asadabad
KABUL
GHOR
Kabul
Herat
Hari Rod
Bagram
WARDAK
Jalalabad
NANGARHAR
Kabul
AFGHANISTAN
LOGAR
TORA BORA
KHYBER PASS
Peshawar
Islamabad
HERAT
Farah Rod
DAYKUNDI
Logar
PAKTIA
KHOST
GHAZNI
Ghazni
Helmand Rod
URUZGAN
Khash Rod
ZABUL
PAKTIKA
FARAH
Arghandab Rod
Qalat
Lwarah Rod
Kandahar
Lashkar Gah
NIMROZ
KANDAHAR
PAKISTAN
HELMAND
N
0
100 miles
0
100km

A view of the right wing of the Taj Bek Palace on the south-western edge of Kabul in the aftermath of the attack of 27 December 1979. The crown jewel in a network of Afghan government buildings that the Soviets needed to seize in order for the coup to be successful, the palace was the seat of the president, Hafizullah Amin, and was well defended by up to 2,500 troops in entrenched positions. The audacious Soviet operation, called *Storm 333*, was a resounding success; with a mixture of guile, surprise and violence the special-forces groups *Grom* and *Zenit*, together with a paratroop company from the 345th Separate Guards Parachute Regiment and a company from the 154th Separate Spetsnaz Battalion known as the Muslim Battalion – 'a special battalion, based in Tashkent in Turkmenistan, to consist of Tajik, Uzbek, and Turkmen soldiers from the Central Asian republics who spoke the same languages as the people on the other side of the Afghan frontier' (Braithwaite 2011: 56) – stormed the defences of the palace, securing it within 43 minutes. Hafizullah Amin, convinced almost until the last that it was rebels and not the Soviets who were coming for him, died with his five-year-old son in a hail of gunfire. (Andrei Abramov/CC BY-SA 4.0)

of Soviet military power in support of the hated communist government in Kabul provided a focus for rebels of every stripe. The historian and Islamic expert Olivier Roy, a frequent visitor to the region, observed of the Afghan character that 'There was no spirit of patriotism, but a profound sense of cultural identity' (Roy 1986: 13). That cultural identity defined itself through Islam and the social networks of rural life, both of which were fundamentally threatened by the Soviet invasion; the result was an almost instantaneous guerrilla war against the occupiers that would spread and intensify for most of the new decade.

OKSVA (*Ogranichenny Kontingent Sovietskikh Voisk v Afganistane*, 'The Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan') was the name given to the Soviet occupying troops who would wage an unforgiving war for the next ten years. For such men the fighting would be nothing like that for which they were trained, and the culture shock was to be equally profound: 'When crossing the border, even a Soviet officer with a Central Asian background judged: "It was as if we'd found ourselves in the Middle Ages, in an entirely different world"' (quoted in Behrends 2015: 723). Poorly led, badly supplied, fighting an enemy they didn't understand in often hellishly difficult terrain in a conflict of breathtaking savagery, even the best Soviet soldiers would find their time in Afghanistan to be an uncompromising experience.

The Opposing Sides

ORGANIZATION AND DOCTRINE

Soviet

The Soviet Union had been a pioneer in the development of airborne forces, though their operational history in the Great Patriotic War (1941–45) was hamstrung by muddled thinking and the scarcity of suitable aircraft to deliver them in significant numbers. In the post-war years the VDV (*Vozdushno-Desantnaya Voyska*, 'Air Landing Force') developed into a strategic asset seven divisions strong and designed around deep operations in a tactical nuclear environment, its troops air-landed or dropped by parachute. The advent of

Airborne soldiers in Kabul prior to their withdrawal from Afghanistan, 16 August 1988. There was always a high turnover of troops in theatre: 'Twice a year the USSR sent replacements to the 40th Army: in the fall came the men called up in the spring, and in the spring came the men called up in the fall. Despite continual reinforcements units always operated below strength with anywhere from one-quarter to one-third of the men on sick call or hospitalized with some serious disease or malady (hepatitis, typhus, malaria, dysentery, or meningitis mostly) at any given time' (Reese 2001: 166). Another side-effect of this practice was regularly to drain the most experienced soldiers from the army, leaving the replacements to learn anew the lessons mastered by their homeward-bound predecessors. (BERTRAND DE SAISSET/AFP/Getty Images)

Soviet soldiers sitting on a BMD driving through Kabul, March 1986.The BMD-1 (*Boyevaya Mashina Desanta*, 'Combat Vehicle of the Airborne') was the workhorse of the airborne infantry and (in standard configuration) could carry seven men, including driver and gunner. Each regiment had over 100 BMDs in three slightly different versions: the BMD-1 was the standard squad vehicle; the BMD M1979/1 was for grenade-launcher and air-defence platoons; and the BMD-1 KSh was the command vehicle at battalion and regimental level. Airborne soldier Yuri Yurchenko wrote that the BMDs 'weren't bad as such, although they were slow. The biggest problem was that their armor was very light. It was made of aluminum and magnesium; only the turret was made of steel armor; a large caliber machine gun easily pierces the armor of this type of vehicle, not to mention a bazooka. In my vehicle, one soldier's rifle went off by mistake. There was a bump the size of a fist on the outer covering of the vehicle' (quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 22–23). (US Department of Defense/CC BY-SA 3.0)

more powerful helicopters and heavy-lift aircraft increased the capability of the VDV, and the development of the BMD (*Boyevaya Mashina Desanta*, 'Combat Vehicle of the Airborne') allowed the airborne divisions to evolve into a fully mechanized air-delivered force that overcame the usual limitations of air-delivered troops – poor mobility and a lack of heavy weapons (Zaloga 1985: 9–12). The father of the modern VDV, General of the Army Vasily Filippovich Margelov, observed in January 1977 that: 'Now airborne forces are equipped with the most perfect means of waging combat. Perhaps in no other type of force is there concentrated such a variety of arms and equipment. Soviet airborne forces can appear in the enemy rear, having at their disposal all that is essential for the conduct of battle (operations)' (quoted in Glantz 1984: 162). Despite such a grand view, the troops of the VDV would find no strategic or even operational role in Afghanistan; the war would be mostly fought at the tactical level, with the majority of engagements involving companies and battalions, with regimental-strength actions mostly being reserved for large operations such as the series of major sweeps through the Panjshir Valley that dominated the early years of the war. More often than not they would perform well, but their local victories could not compensate for larger Soviet strategic failings.

The Soviet airborne element of OKSVA was primarily comprised of the VDV's 103rd Guards Airborne Division stationed at Kabul Airport, with additional airmobile brigades, air-assault brigades, separate parachute regiments, and specialist organizations of the KGB and GRU rotating throughout the war. Airmobile brigades and air-assault brigades, though they had much in common with the airborne divisions of the VDV (including the same uniforms and *telnyashka* striped vests), were different: developed from the late 1960s in recognition of US experiences in Vietnam, airmobile brigades 'consisted of light infantry troops which do not use armoured vehicles, have limited firepower and depend on helicopters for mobility' (Heath 1989: 9); air-assault brigades (DShB, *Desantnaya Shturmvaya Brigada*), developed in the late 1970s, were 'an operational level helicopter assault force introduced at the front level … a unique organization combining parachute elements with helicopter-lift units' (Glantz 1984: 154) that equipped two of their four

battalions with BMDs. As the war progressed the number of Spetsnaz units (*Voyska spetsialnogo naznacheniya*, 'Special Purpose Forces') also increased dramatically, eventually seeing two brigades deployed (the 15th Special Forces Brigade at Jalalabad and the 22nd Special Forces Brigade at Asadabad), mostly targeting the Mujahideen supply lines and the caravans that ran along them.

Mujahideen

Initially reliant on the *qawm* (the basic social unit in Afghanistan), resistance to the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) government and its Soviet supporters developed into a widespread insurgency directed by a political alliance of the seven main Mujahideen groups (colloquially known as the 'Peshawar Seven'), each operating on a different front. The territory of these military-political organizations was dotted with fixed bases from which permanent combat groups of around 25–50 men 'with a reserve double the size that can be mobilised at a moment's notice' (Roy 1986: 176) would mount patrols and ambushes in their area of control. Larger bases evolved into strongholds, usually under the auspices of talented local commanders, situated deep in the mountains.

As the nature of the war changed the Mujahideen had to change with it, leading to the development of a more fleet-footed approach to warfighting: 'The mobile Mujahideen groups were larger and consisted of young (under

Three Mujahideen photographed while on their way up to Saohol Sar Pass in Kunar province, August 1985. The central figure carries an unloaded RPG-7 grenade launcher, his companions either side carry .303in Short Magazine Lee-Enfield No. 4 (Mk I or Mk II) bolt-action rifles. The use of such rifles, as well as older-model Lee-Enfields, surplus weapons from various past wars and even single-shot rifles from the 19th century was quite common, such weapons being much prized by their owners, often being family heirlooms to boot. Rifle ownership was a natural corollary to manhood throughout rural Afghanistan, and the practice of owning and maintaining a personal weapon, as well as learning to shoot with it, was second nature. (Erwinlux)

A new recruit for the insurgency, 1980. Defence analyst David Isby noted that 'The fighting men range from 12-year-olds to greybeard veterans of the Third Afghan War' (Isby 1986: 23), and reflected the strengths and weaknesses of the society from which they were drawn. (Keystone/Getty Images)

25), unmarried, better-trained warriors. Sometimes the mobile Mujahideen were paid. The mobile Mujahideen ranged over a much larger area of operations than the local Mujahideen and were more responsive to the plans and desires of the factions' (Grau 2004: 139). In Panjshir under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Massoud the system evolved into one where fighters were split between fixed 'local' groups (*mahalli*) and mobile groups (*grup-i-mutaharek*):

> The *mahalli* ensure the security of and defence of the territory in case of attack … [and are] only lightly armed … The *grup-i-mutaharek* are professional soldiers, well trained, well armed and provided with uniforms; in each group there are 33 men, usually divided into three sub-groups each with its own commander, his deputy and someone to link with the other groups … the men, unhampered by a lot of equipment, can get around quickly and do not need more logistical support than the resistance can provide. (Roy 1986: 181–82)

The exact numbers of Mujahideen are impossible to come by, but a reasonable estimate is that there were between 20,000 and 100,000 'regular' fighters, supplemented by around 150,000 part-time fighters (Reese 2001: 167). The Mujahideen were volunteers, from late boyhood to late middle age, who took up their own arms to fight against the invaders in their local areas. Most had family to support, and as such the taking of booty was a factor in their warmaking, as were the seasons, with spring and autumn being the most congenial times for combat operations. War was, for most Afghans, a chance to answer the call of *jihad* and show prowess and bravery in the face of a despised enemy, and by so doing earn personal recognition and glory. Though the conflict would force cultural adaptation and a degree of professionalization on the Mujahideen, the essential nature of the fighters, and their view of what it was they were fighting for, would remain unchanged.

RECRUITMENT, MORALE AND LOGISTICS

Soviet

The indisputable moral clarity of the Great Patriotic War was nowhere to be found in Afghanistan. This war was a sideshow, never remotely approaching a national struggle, and as such it failed to engage the interest or the sympathies of officialdom or wider Soviet society. Even within the Soviet

Soviet soldiers in winter uniforms with 'fish fur' collars and *ushanka* headgear and carrying AK-74 assault rifles, winter 1979/80. The reasons that the average Soviet soldier was given for the need to fight in Afghanistan were varied and usually spurious, if not outright fantastical: 'Soviet veterans of the war revealed that explanations for intervention had no factual basis whatsoever. One soldier said: "We were told that we would have to help the Afghan people defend their revolution from foreign mercenaries. They said that there were many mercenaries from Pakistan, China, and the United States in the country." Another claimed that, "Just before we went to Kabul, we were informed by our *zampolit* [political officer] that we would have to fight Iranian and Pakistani forces that had entered the country from outside." One soldier was told his unit would be fighting Chinese mercenaries dressed as Afghans. A fourth related that: "The political officer gave this lecture about the international situation: he told us that Soviet forces had forestalled the American Green Berets airborne invasion of Afghanistan by just one hour. It was so incessantly drummed into us that this was a sacred 'international duty' that eventually we believed it"' (quoted in Reese 2001: 167–68). (Getty Images)

Army Afghan service was the unlucky preserve of a relative few; some who served were volunteers, idealists or men who wanted to test themselves in battle, but most were young conscripts, 18–20 years old, who were packed off to the front with justifications that were 'for the most part amateurish and counterproductive' (Reese 2001: 197). Some didn't even know where they were going until they arrived at the staging base in Tashkent in Turkmenistan when the hard truth of their real destination was revealed to them, with crates of vodka thoughtfully provided to help the news go down (Alexievich 1992: 27–28).

Once in theatre the realization that friends were often indistinguishable from foes came as a rude shock to many, and would prove to be both enervating and terrifying in turn. Private Malkov, recently arrived with his unit in the early stages of the war, was collecting water with three comrades, one of whom wandered into the nearby local market to buy some film for his camera; the man, Valera Zhitskikh, came running back, screaming:

> Blood was spurting from his throat. It'd been cut from ear to ear. He'd been running some twenty meters more, then collapsed. We seized our guns. But whom to shoot? Bursting with rage, we were nearly blind with hatred. We kept combing this g__damn market again and again to its bottom but no good came of it. We never found the killer and Valera's gun. That day we realized that the enemies were not only in the Pakistan gangs or among those who hid high up in the mountains. They may also be among people living next door to our camp. Any time, any place they could stab you or shoot a bullet right in our faces. Thus, in a natural way, I was confronted with a question: whom were we defending here? and from whom? where was the enemy? (Quoted in Reese 2001: 168)

Soviet paratrooper

A *desantnik* (literally one who 'lands' or 'descends') from the 2nd Platoon of the 317th Guards Parachute Regiment's Reconnaissance Company moves into a better position in the mountains above the village of Shigal. The paratrooper carries the Dragunov, an extremely reliable and hard-wearing rifle that was increasingly issued in large numbers, usually to the designated marksmen of rifle platoons, and as such was not a true sniper's weapon, though it proved to be highly effective none the less. He is utilizing a form of the 'hasty sling' technique to give him greater control and stability when quickly aiming and firing his rifle.

The Kunar Valley, 29 February 1980

Weapons, dress and equipment

He is armed with a 7.62×54mmR semi-automatic SVD-63 (*Snayperskaya Vintovka Dragunova* – 'Dragunov sniper rifle') (**1**) equipped with a PSO-1 4×24mm 'scope; in the hands of a marksman using the correct ammunition, this rifle was deadly accurate out to 800m. He also carries a 9×18mm Makarov pistol (**2**) for emergencies. The paratrooper's conspicuous blue beret was not usually worn in the field, so instead he sports a *panamka* boonie hat (**3**), a design from 1937 that was revived at the start of the Soviet–Afghan War; he wears a two-piece KLMK uniform (*kamuflirovanniy letniy maskirovochniy komplekt* – 'summer camouflage deceptive set') (**4**), though he has removed the detachable hood. Made of light cotton and first issued in 1975–76, the suit is worn over a long-sleeved version of the ubiquitous *telnyashka* striped vest (**5**), a legacy of Major-General Vasily Filippovich Margelov's appointment as head of the VDV (*Vozdushno-Desantnaya Voyska*, 'Air Landing Force') in 1954 (Margelov had served in the Naval Infantry during the Great Patriotic War and brought the *telnyashka* across from them to his new branch of service as a sign of the VDV's elite status).

He has an RD-54 backpack (**6**), originally designed to be worn with a parachute; he has detached the integral pouches from the backpack harness and threaded them onto his belt (otherwise to remove his pack would necessitate unbuckling his belt as well; such changes, including the discarding of the ammunition and grenade pouches altogether, were very common alterations to the RD-54 in Afghanistan). He wears a standard-issue leather belt (**7**), the buckle of which has been muted with a coat of olive-green paint; the RD-54's grenade pouch (**8**) bears two F1 *limonka* hand grenades and he has filled one cell of the magazine pouch with two 20-round boxes of loose 7.62×54mmR ammunition and the other with flares (**9**); he carries a dedicated ammunition pouch for his Dragunov (**10**) that stores four spare magazines as well as a cleaning kit and spare parts for the PSO-1 'scope, an AKM Mark II bayonet (**11**) as a general utility knife, and two large 1.5-litre plastic water bottles (**12**). Finally, he carries another flare in his RD-54 backpack's shoulder cell (**13**). His weapons and equipment weigh around 20–23kg.

DRA troops (probably from the 3rd Division of Interior Ministry Sarnadoy Police, a paramilitary force at the beck and call of the Ministry of the Interior) man a Soviet-supplied BMP-1 on the outskirts of Kabul. Relations between Soviet soldiers and their Afghan comrades were variable at best, with the usual state of affairs being one of Soviet contempt for their unreliable DRA allies. One veteran, Yuri Khlusov, noted how: 'During training a lieutenant colonel told us that the Afghans say one thing, do another, and think a third' (quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 29). (Robert Nickelsberg/The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images)

Conditions of service were extremely harsh, with even the most common essentials such as food often in short supply; those rations that were provided were usually so poor they proved all but inedible, leading to cases of malnutrition and even scurvy for those who didn't trade with the locals or steal to supplement their diet. Airborne soldier Yuri Yurchenko, who lost nearly 20kg during his time there, remembered how he only had proper rations for a month and a half of his tour, while for the rest of the time 'We were given dried potatoes that you could've used to caulk the windows, the sort of bread that broke my teeth when I ate it, porridge that looked most of all like something left in the toilet bowl' (quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 18).

The sheer cruelty of the war was staggering. Captured rebels were routinely killed out of hand, and the loss of men in action often led to random acts of retaliatory violence against the nearest Afghans, whether fighters or not. The mutilating horrors inflicted on captured Soviet soldiers caused deep shock and a furious desire for vengeance that found expression in the destruction of villages and the wholesale murder of their inhabitants, such atrocities often being officially sanctioned. The effect of inflicting and suffering such misery was dehumanizing and traumatic; in such an environment it was not unknown for soldiers to wound themselves, to murder their officers or their bullying tormentors in the barracks, to descend into madness or to find a final escape through suicide.

A wounded guerrilla, 1989. Historian Jan Claas Behrends provides a damning assessment of the role of violence in the 40th Army: 'Rather than channeling and controlling the use of force, the Soviet Army created opportunities to act violently … Soldiers were expected to use violence in order to protect themselves and their platoon. The use of violence could also raise their status … Violence was also used as a means to communicate: burned villages or mutilated bodies conveyed a message. The situation in Afghanistan left little options for those who served there … The only escape was desertion, self-inflicted wounds, or suicide. All of these reactions were common among Soviet conscripts' (Behrends 2015: 728). (David Stewart-Smith/ Getty Images)

Mujahideen

On the average Afghan's view of whom he was fighting for, Soviet Union expert Lester Grau noted that

> personal loyalty is primarily to family, *qawm* (social, school or trade group) and tribe. Higher loyalty to cause and regional or national leaders is situational. Units may change sides in battle when the other side is winning. A common perception is that the other side is winning because it is God's will and one should not oppose God's will. Temporary truces and alliances are common. Loyalty can be rented, but the term length of the rental is uncertain. (Grau 2004: 130)

The tribal nature of such a system had to react to the realities of a war that targeted villages, crops and civilians in a deliberate attempt to break the back of Mujahideen support. The viciousness of such campaigning had obvious consequences; paratrooper Vladislav Tamarov understood the repercussions of Soviet behaviour: 'I saw other things too: villages destroyed by our shelling and bodies of women, killed by mistake. When you shoot at every rustling in the bushes, there's no time to think about who's there. But for an Afghan, it didn't matter if his wife had been killed intentionally or accidentally. He went into the mountains to seek revenge' (Tamarov 2001: 115–16).

Aside from a few early battles, the Mujahideen never tried to adapt to their enemy's way of war, instead relying on their own traditional strengths mixed with tried-and-tested methods of guerrilla warfare, both of which made the most of what little weaponry and equipment they had. Olivier Roy observed that 'It is a resistance organised by poor people in a war waged by the poor' (Roy 1986: 188). Weapons and supplies were either captured from the enemy, handed over by deserting DRA troops, or bought in Pakistan and transported across the border by slow, laborious caravans (mules in the mountains, camels in the deserts). More substantial international aid was funnelled through Pakistani channels managed by the ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence Agency), who creamed off a substantial slice before passing on what remained to those

Mujahideen at sunset prayer, Shultan Valley, Kunar 1987. Olivier Roy observed the role of faith in the war: 'The preaching of the mullahs … falls upon fertile soil. Collective prayers and preaching in the mosques have reached an intensity unlike anything that was ever witnessed before the war. The sacrifices which the war imposes are easily borne, providing that their purpose is clear. People accept Islamic taxes, are willing to provide lodging for the Mujahidin and even suffer the bombardments which come as reprisals, provided that the resistance acts in an honourable way towards them, fights effectively instead of living on the country and gains a modicum of success. The government, and more especially the Russians, have never been thought of as protagonists in a civil war, but as standing for a diabolical reality in a universe apart' (Roy 1986: 158–59). (Erwinlux)

Studied bonhomie among new recruits, 1988. The daily reality of life for new soldiers in the Soviet Army was dominated by *dedovshchina*, a hierarchy of bullying based on length of service. A gunner remembered the abject cruelty it could involve: 'The new recruit is an object. He can be got out of bed at night and beaten up with chairs, sticks, fists and feet. In the daytime, he's beaten up in the toilet, and his backpack, personal possessions, his cans of meat and biscuits from home (if any) are stolen. There's no television or radio or newspapers, so entertainment goes according to the law of the jungle. "Wash my socks, sweetie-pie!" That's nothing compared to "Now, lick my socks, sweetie-pie, lick them good so that everyone can see you"' (quoted in Alexievich 1992: 58). The bullies didn't always have things their own way, however; a nurse recalled how 'In Kunduz two "grandads" forced a new recruit to dig a hole one night and stand in it. They buried him up to his neck, with only his head sticking out of the ground, and urinated over him all night long. When they dug him out in the morning he shot them both dead' (quoted in Alexievich 1992: 137). (TASS via Getty Images)

guerrilla groups they favoured for their own political reasons (namely the ones with a more fundamentalist bent), mostly ignoring those (like Massoud's Jamiat-i-Islami Mujahideen faction) they disliked.

LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATIONS

Soviet

Soviet officers were generally known as 'jackals' to their enlisted men, which gives a sense of the open contempt in which most of them were held. The memoirs of Soviet soldiers are riddled with accounts of officers engaged in drunkenness, the violent bullying of their own men, graft, outright theft (from the Army, the Afghans and their own soldiers), blatant cowardice, and any number of other dispiritingly selfish activities; the reports of such behaviour are so common that it appears reasonable to assume that such problems were not just widespread but systemic. Yuri Yurchenko noted

> how little the officers demanded of themselves and how much of the soldiers. To them a soldier was an animal to whom you could do anything … The officer could permit himself anything at all – even cowardice. We had an ensign who used to piss through the loophole so that he didn't have to get out of the vehicle. First Lieutenant Dyban, on the other hand, used to lie in hiding behind a rock and shout at the soldiers, 'Cowards! Forward, cowards!' Those cowards were, god knows, way ahead of him, and he didn't even realise that they had long since gone past him. (Quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 16)

Much of the damage that bad or poorly trained junior officers can inflict is mitigated in most Western armies by the presence of a strong corps of professional non-commissioned officers, but the Soviet Army (and the Red Army before it) never developed such a cadre of men for a variety of reasons,

some historical, some structural, some political. The poisonous, informal disciplinary rite of *dedovshchina* (literally, the 'rule of the grandfathers') dominated relations between senior soldiers and their more junior charges; it was a violent and arbitrary system of bullying and humiliation whereby recruits were robbed, forced into doing menial tasks, and made to act as personal servants to their supposed comrades and superiors. Most Soviet soldiers adapted to the system, though many understood that 'in other armies the positive aspects they claimed for *dedovshchina* were the responsibility of experienced professional NCOs. Alexander Gergel, a conscript sergeant in the 860th Separate Motor-Rifle Regiment, accepted that *dedovshchina* had eaten away at the military system. That would not change, he thought, until the Russian army too was given the corps of long-service professional NCOs it lacked' (Braithwaite 2011: 173). The officers by and large turned a blind eye to the whole process.

An 82mm 2B9 *Vasilek* automatic gun-mortar. The Soviet Army's artillery, one of its most dominating tools, was seriously wrong-footed in Afghanistan. Designed to achieve the obliteration of Western mechanized armies on the plains of Europe, it had no targets of comparable value in this new, mountainous theatre of operations. In such an environment mortars would once again prove their worth. Each airborne regiment would have one integral mortar battery, while air-assault and airmobile-assault battalions would have their own mortar batteries; they all used 120mm M1943/M120 mortars at the outset of the war, though these were gradually replaced by the 120mm 2B11 *Sani* ('Sleigh') or its truck-transported variant, the 2S12 *Sani*, as the war dragged on. Indirect-fire support was also available in the form of rocketry launched from BM-21 *Grad* ('Hail') trucks, as well as from the 82mm 2B9 *Vasilek* ('Cornflower') automatic gun-mortar, a flexible and effective weapon that looked more like a light artillery piece and had a direct-fire capability as well, a factor which made it very popular with manoeuvring assault units (Grau 1997: 2–3). (ShinePhantom/CC BY-SA 3.0)

Of course there were also good officers, men who looked to the welfare of their troopers and who led from the front when in combat, but the overall record, even in the elite formations of the VDV, wasn't good, with numerous instances of both junior and senior officers' bad character and patchy tactical knowledge leading to failed missions and high losses. Fieldcraft was often lacking, and inexperience in the proper management of men on patrol as well as in combat reduced the effectiveness of many units, in part through unnecessary casualties caused by environmental factors like dehydration, heat exhaustion and frostbite. Even calling for artillery support was problematic, Lester Grau noting that 'In theory, all Soviet combat arms officers could adjust indirect artillery fire, but practice constantly demonstrated that non-artillery officers were not up to the challenge or not trusted to do so' (Grau 1997: 3). Such shortcomings reflected not just the haphazard nature of the training many of them had received, but also the fact that the Soviet Army was designed around a different kind of war, and was very slow to adapt to the new nature of the fight in Afghanistan.

As may be expected, whatever the shortcomings under which the Soviet officer corps laboured, their communications were significantly more advanced than anything enjoyed by their enemy. An airborne company operating out of BMDs would have one R-107 VHF set (weighing 16.9kg with a range of 6–26km depending on the antenna used), four portable R-148 VHF sets (weighing 3kg with a range of 6km) for the platoons, as well as R-123 VHF sets mounted in each BMD. Operations in the mountainous areas severely reduced the range and effectiveness of radio communications, however, necessitating the use of helicopters (such as the Mi-8VZPU airborne command post) or a ground-based radio-relay chain for retransmission, the latter being a laborious and time-consuming process that took the Soviets some time to master.

Mujahideen fighter

A guerrilla armed with an RPG-7 makes his way towards a Soviet/DRA armoured column that is bogged down on the road to Shigal village. He has been manoeuvring through gullies and defiles to get into an optimal firing position without being seen by the Soviets and DRA troops who huddle in the 'safety' of their armoured personnel carriers; though the RPG-7 could score hits at up to 500m, the chances of doing so are exceedingly slim, thus for this insurgent the ideal range will be less than 100m from his target, maybe as little as 25m – so close as to all but guarantee a kill.

The Kunar Valley, 29 February 1980

Weapons, dress and equipment

The insurgent carries an RPG-7 (*Ruchnoy Protivotankoviy Granatomyot* – 'hand-held anti-tank grenade launcher') (**1**) armed with an 85mm PG-7VM HEAT warhead, together with a 7.62×39mm AKMS (*Avtomat Kalashnikova Modernizirovanniy Skladnoy* – 'Folding Kalashnikov modernized automatic rifle') (**2**). He wears a traditional tribal turban (**3**) common throughout the area, as well as a locally made waistcoat covering the traditional male *perahan tunban* (**4**) and a pair of old, shabby boots. Over his clothes he wears a chest rig (**5**) of indeterminate origin (but most likely derived from the Chinese Type 56 AK), loaded with three 30-round SKMS magazines and two F1 *limonka* hand grenades in the side-pockets. His weapons and equipment weigh around 14.5kg.

Mujahideen

Afghan command was decentralized and dependent to a large extent on local custom and the regional 'headmen' of a *qawm* who made up the ruling *jirga* or *shura*. Decisions on operational matters would vary from region to region, and would be informed by the relative strength of the local rebel commanders as well as the political networks within which they operated. At a lower level the Mujahideen in the more established bases would typically be split into platoon-sized groups looked after by a leader:

> he is a lieutenant in charge of the section and he is usually older than the soldiers under his command, having had a certain amount of education. Nevertheless, there is not much difference between officers and ordinary privates … They eat the same food and sleep in the same room. They are always together and there is not much opportunity for privacy. (Roy 1986: 174)

Communications, like everything else in the Mujahideen arsenal, was basic, with almost no equipment and even fewer men who knew how to use it. Nevertheless, defections from the DRA brought equipment and the knowledge of how to use it, equipment that was supplemented by radio base stations established in Pakistan and war booty taken from the Soviets, allowing the guerrillas to develop relatively effective radio systems. Afghan radio use was often employed defensively, as observed by Spetsnaz officer Timothy Gusinov:

> For better protection of their fortified bases and strongholds, enemy forces established a local early warning system that consisted of a net of observation posts. Small radio stations were located as far as from 5 to 15 kilometers from

A group of Mujahideen fighters with their commander Ajab Khan, who were a part of Mohammad Yunus Khalis's group Hezb-i-Islami ('Party of Islam'), photographed in the Shultan Valley, Kunar, in October 1987. Hezb-i-Islami Khalis (so called to differentiate it from Hezb-e Islami, the group operated by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar from which Mohammad Yunus Khalis had broken away in 1979 to form his own party) was one of the so-called 'Peshawar Seven', a loose alliance of groups that came together to make up a common military and political front against the Afghan government and their Soviet supporters. Note the ubiquity of AK-47/AKM assault rifles proudly on display, as well as the variety of styles of chest rigs worn (no two of them the same). (Erwinlux)

Mujahideen in Munda Dir district communicating by radio with comrades fighting in Kunar, Afghanistan, 1985. At the outset of the war the disparate factions that made up the Mujahideen were poorly armed and equipped. Mass defections by DRA troops brought significant amounts of Soviet-made and supplied weapons and kit, which was augmented over time by the spoils of war (captured and knocked-out vehicles being stripped of everything remotely useful) as well as the gradually increasing shipments of *matériel* from the ever more sophisticated base camps and arms bazaars along the Pakistan border. Such new equipment – heavy machine guns, mines, anti-tank rockets, man-portable anti-aircraft missiles, radios and communications systems, mortars, artillery pieces and even tanks – encouraged, indeed necessitated, a gradual professionalization throughout many parts of the insurgency. (Erwinlux)

> each post. This distance does not seem like much when flying in a jet, but it is enough to give advanced warning of approaching helicopters. Also, such posts kept air force bases under observation, reporting every group take off. (Gusinov 2002: 106)

The radios used had either been brought over from Pakistan or were war booty taken from the Soviets or given over freely by disaffected troops of the DRA.

ARMAMENT, TRAINING AND TACTICS

Soviet

The VDV veteran Vladislav Tamarov observed that

> Before being sent to Afghanistan, airborne units were supposed to complete a special six-month training course in the Soviet Union. For other kinds of troops, training was just a formality and lasted only a few weeks, except for the special troops, the landing storm troops [air-assault brigades]. These units received the same training (and even wore the same uniform) as the [airborne]. (Tamarov 2001: 19)

Despite such elite status, airborne and air-assault troops rarely entered Afghanistan fully trained – the reality was usually three months, often less for soldiers selected for replacement drafts. Some cases were precipitous; Aleksandr Lavrov, who served during 1984–86, recalled how 'I had been in the army only two weeks before I went to Afghanistan. During those two weeks I shot one cartridge with an assault rifle, threw one practice hand grenade, and learned a soldier's and guard's duties in the *Regulations*. That's all; that's my total preparation before going to Afghanistan' (quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 66). Igor Ponomarenko, who served in an airborne battalion during 1981–82, wrote of how

A 30×29mm AGS-17 *Plamya* ('Flame') belt-fed high-explosive grenade launcher being employed in a training exercise for newly arrived troops, sometime in 1986. The troops, sheltering inside dugouts, would be bombarded by the AGS-17 to harden them to some of the shocks and noise that they could expect if and when they came under attack. With a rate of fire of 350–400rd/min and a range of 800m for specific targets (and a maximum effective range of 1,700m), the *Plamya* was an extremely effective infantry support weapon; it would often be mounted on a variety of vehicles or, in the case of airborne troops inserted by helicopter, manhandled by the gun's crew of two paratroopers themselves, the gun (18kg) and its 6T8 tripod (12kg) each fitting into specially designed carrying packs. (E. Kuvakin, Vizu/CC BY-SA 3.0)

> it made me laugh to remember what we were taught. It seems amazing that at that time our training wasn't taken more seriously; we weren't told about other detachments' war experiences, which had been acquired in corresponding conditions, or about their mistakes – in other words, about everything which is vitally important to a soldier before he goes on a combat mission. (Quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 35)

Despite such shortcomings, training would continue within the recruit's unit, where, unlike in the parsimonious Motherland, weapons and ammunition of every sort were plentiful. VDV and DShB forces were well equipped with the full panoply of Soviet small arms, as well as those integral to their vehicles (BMD-1s); they could also rely upon air assets (usually the Mi-8 'Hip' and Mi-24 'Hind' helicopters), as well as on various elements of self-propelled artillery such as the 120mm 2S9 NONA mortar, the 85mm ASU-85 assault gun, the BM-21 *Grad* ('Hail') multiple-rocket launcher and the quad-barrelled ZSU-23-4 *Shilka* anti-aircraft gun over and above fire support from dedicated batteries.

The tactical situation that confronted Soviet forces in Afghanistan was radically different to that for which they had trained: 'The terrain, the climate and the enemy were entirely different from what they had prepared for. In this locale, their equipment functioned less than optimally, their force structure was clearly inappropriate and their tactics were obviously wrong' (Grau 2001: xvii). Initially determined on a defensive posture to protect the main centres of population and the limited road networks that connected them, the Soviets were quickly drawn into a more aggressive stance, launching offensives against major Mujahideen-controlled areas such as the Panjshir Valley. Such operations were combined-arms sweeps that saw significant use of airborne troops in concert with *bronegruppa* (armoured group) tactics that aimed to catch rebel forces between a motorized-infantry hammer and an air-inserted VDV anvil, though the poor levels of coordination and the lack of initiative displayed by most Soviet officers and their men meant that success was often partial and temporary.

As the war progressed the troops of the VDV and DShB adapted more quickly and much more successfully than the 40th Army's mechanized divisions, developing effective helicopter insertion and counter-insurgency tactics that bore much fruit. Airborne units were still employed in the *blokirovka* (blocking manoeuvres) role, but they were also used to interdict Mujahideen supply columns and to launch search-and-destroy missions and surprise attacks against guerrilla strongholds. A Soviet officer described how 'Air assaults were normally conducted to seize dominant terrain and road junctions. They would land directly on the target or adjacent to it. As a rule, prior to landing the first lift and the main body, we would use air,

artillery and even small-arms fire to suppress the enemy' (quoted in Grau 2001: 77).

The physical capabilities of paratroopers married to their proper utilization in irregular warfare could prove a formidable mix. A former Mujahid described one such encounter:

> We had taken positions close to the top of a mountain overlooking a valley and were shooting at the Soviets with BM-12s [rockets] and mortars ... Then all of a sudden a VDV company of about 90 men appeared and attacked us from behind. They had climbed straight up the mountain during the night … We fought for two days there, and many people were killed. Before that I had thought that the Soviet soldiers are not worth anything, but I must say that I had never seen anything like that. We had good food there and I was in good shape, but I would not have been able to climb that mountain. It was simply impossible for me. These were really tough guys. (Alexiev 1988: 27)

Soviet soldiers in hand-to-hand combat exercises, 1988. Though training could be slapdash in the Soviet Army, the VDV (*Vozdushno-Desantnaya Voyska*, 'Air Landing Force') instructors were generally more consistent, aware as they were of their hard-won elite status. (TASS via Getty Images)

Mujahideen

Mujahideen tactics were by and large local refinements of tried-and-tested guerrilla practices, with raids, ambushes, shelling attacks, mine laying and blocking lines of communication all playing a part. Owing to the general lack of (and indifferent experience with) heavy weapons, guerrilla attacks against fixed positions tended to be more spectacular than successful. Nevertheless, Mujahideen tactics did evolve, mostly in finding ways to escape Soviet sweeps and heliborne insertions:

> The Mujahideen learned to counter air assaults with thorough planning, immediate action drills, an early warning system and air defense ambushes. They learned to mine likely LZs, employ massed RPG fire against hovering or landing helicopters, and to try and overrun a LZ before the air assault forces had an opportunity to get organized and oriented. They also learned to 'hug' Soviet forces so that helicopter gunships could not fire at them. (Jalali & Grau 2001: 239)

Writer Artyom Borovik noted that 'Each band of rebels has its own style of fighting. And despite a common headquarters, each has its own interests and views on conducting combat operations' (Borovik 2001: 81).

Training levels were, as might be expected, generally low: 'there is, within combat groups, no attempt to apportion tasks or to specialise in the pursuit of certain objectives. The resistance is short of officers with technical training, or of sergeants who could provide instruction; there is little provision for training

A guerrilla posing with a Soviet-designed/Chinese-made variant of the 12.7×108mm DShK heavy machine gun (known as the *dashaka*) used as an anti-aircraft gun in Jaji, Paktia province, August 1984. To defend themselves against the incessant threat of air attack the Mujahideen relied primarily on DShK and 14.5×114mm KPV heavy machine guns (often sourced from Egypt or China), as well as MANPAD units armed with *Strela-2, Strela-2M,* Chinese HN-5 and American FIM-43 Redeye surface-to-air missiles, later augmented by the unpopular British-manufactured Blowpipe and the more well-received American FIM-92 Stinger. Such tools were also used offensively to harry aircraft near Soviet airbases, and to interdict jet and helicopter flightpaths: 'Special free-hunting missile teams usually consisted of from 10 to 20 soldiers; one to two trained missile men; and two to three soldiers to carry additional tubes. Other team members carried infantry weapons for protection and cover' (Gusinov 2002: 106). Despite access to such advanced weaponry, the lion's share of kills went to the guns, which 'caused from 50 to 70 percent of helicopter losses and damage and from 40 to 50 percent of aircraft losses and damage' (Gusinov 2002: 106). (Erwinlux)

recruits and [the rebels'] democratic attitude assumes that everyone is capable of carrying out any task' (Roy 1986: 184). Small arms were common enough, and the lifelong possession of personal weapons meant that most Mujahideen were competent shots, some extremely so, but more complex weapons systems like mortars, recoilless rifles and indeed any form of artillery, were poorly utilized. Levels of training and competence improved as the war progressed, sometimes significantly, especially in relation to the large hauls of weapons and *matériel* that was taken as booty, but it was never consistent. Mujahideen leader Mohammad Amin Wardak observed rather soberly that 'More weapons without more training means only more martyrs' (Isby 1986: 36).

Good intelligence played a vital part in Mujahideen operations, both offensive and defensive, and there was always a ready supply of informants in the population – not to mention the Afghan Army – to provide regular news of Soviet plans and intentions. The rebel commander Abdul Haq described the situation where such foreknowledge allowed his men to force the Soviets to abandon their ambushes:

> In order to discourage the enemy, we simply ambush the ambushers. With reliable advance information about the time and place of the ambush we took position before the arrival of the enemy. We carried out five operations of this kind, and each time we killed 10 to 15 Russians, all the élite commandos whom the Russians were not very eager to lose, and our action produced its expected results. (Quoted in McMichael 1991: 75)

Airborne soldier Vadim Isachenko remembered how

> Sometimes the guerrillas arranged ambushes. Usually they knew ahead of time where we would land, and they were ready and waiting. It was claimed that the information leaked from our headquarters. I don't know how valid that claim is. I'm more inclined to believe that the informers were the Afghan soldiers that we took with us on our combat missions. I feared them as much as I feared the guerrillas. (Quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 73)

The Kunar Valley

29 February 1980

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

The Soviet Union's seizure of the Afghan government in the dying days of 1979 was accomplished with speed and efficiency. Unfortunately the government was not synonymous with the country, most of which was in open rebellion against Kabul, whoever happened to rule there. Only seven of the 28 provinces were under the control of the Afghan communist regime, the rest in varying states of riot and disorder. The initial disposition of Soviet troops, in the main population centres and along the road networks that connected them, had little impact on this state of affairs.

Violent insurrection was not confined to the countryside, however. Ambushes and murders of Soviet soldiers were occurring in various locations, and there was a major riot in Kabul on 21 February 1980 that lasted several days. 'The demonstrators filled the main roads and the squares, and marched on the Arg, where [Babrak] Karmal [the new puppet president] was now in residence. Administrative buildings were besieged, the Soviet Embassy was bombarded, and several Soviet citizens were killed. Shops were looted, cars were destroyed, and a major hotel was set on fire' (Braithwaite 2011: 140). It took the active engagement of units of the 40th Army to bring the situation under control. The demonstration proved to be the tipping point for Moscow, recalled Major-General Alexander Antonovich Lyakhovski (a historian of the war who served in Afghanistan from 1984 to 1989), with the Kremlin ordering the 40th Army to 'begin active operations together with the Afghan army to defeat the detachments of the armed opposition' (quoted in Braithwaite 2011: 140).

OKSVA developed a four-stage plan to bring the situation under control. First, relieve the various towns that were under siege by rebels; second, drive the Mujahideen away from the strategic road network, forcing them further

into the mountains where they could do much less harm; third, create a security zone adjacent to Pakistan near the Khyber Pass, thereby cutting off the major route of resupply for the Mujahideen who operated in the north-east of the country; and fourth, directly assault the rebellion in its mountainous heartlands, either by starving them out or by hunting down the guerrilla bands and destroying them in detail (O'Ballance 1980: 49–50).

The choice of the Kunar Valley as the first object of this newly aggressive policy was made in part because of the importance of the Kabul–Asadabad–Barikot road which was a route through the mountains to Pakistan, but also because the whole area was well known as a nest of insurrection that was within easy striking distance of the capital. This was to be the first major operation for Soviet forces since the occupation, and would also serve as an example of the type of combined-arms operation – an airborne insertion of a blocking force that would cut off the escape route of guerrillas fleeing a sweep conducted by a separate motorized contingent – that would predominate in the coming years. It would also become an example of how and why such operations often failed.

Kunar had been one of the foremost trouble-spots before the Soviet invasion, with the beginnings of armed rebellion starting in the summer of 1978. As the resistance grew so Kabul's tolerance for it shrank, resulting in the massacre of possibly up to 1,700 men from the town of Kerala on 20 April 1979 by DRA forces supported by Soviet-piloted attack helicopters; the victims, some still alive, were subsequently bulldozed into a mass grave. 'More than anything else, this bloody event drove the remainder of the population into the hands of the local *khans* who were leading the rebellion against the Communist government. By the summer of 1979, Kunar had become virtually independent' (Williams 2011: 63).

In August 1979 the 5th Brigade of the Afghan 9th Division garrisoning Asmar mutinied en masse; besieged for months by 400 Mujahideen the

Soviet motorized troops relax on their BTR-60 APC on the road between Mazar-i-Sharif and the Soviet Union, January 1980. Though the brunt of much operational fighting was taken on by the airborne elements of the 40th Army, the majority of troops stationed in the country were ground forces: the 5th Guards Motor-Rifle Division at Shindand, the 108th Motor-Rifle Division at Kabul (later Bagram) and the 201st Motor-Rifle Division at Kunduz, as well as several separate motor-rifle brigades and regiments (Braithwaite 2011: 341–43). While such units were often employed in concert with airborne forces in large operations such as the Panjshir offensives, their main job was defensive, securing the road network and ensuring the safety of major urban areas. (Romano Cagnoni/Getty Images)

Mujahideen on the Afghan side of the 3,200m Saohol Sar Pass on the Durand Line border with Pakistan, Kunar, August 1985. Most of the fighters pictured carry a blanket wrapped around their shoulders, an eminently practical garment in the changeable weather of the mountains, but also a useful camouflage tool: 'the mujahideen, upon hearing the approach of a helicopter, would fall to the ground and cover themselves with their patou (earth-colored cloaks). This tactic was both low tech and astoundingly effective in making the insurgents invisible from the air. Kurt Lohbeck, a journalist who traveled extensively with the mujahideen, described his own experience as Soviet helicopters twice flew over his group's position at an altitude of only one hundred feet [30m] without detecting them. Lohbeck states that "a man standing still or squatting just ten yards away was nearly invisible"' (Westermann 1999: 6). (Erwinlux)

2,000-strong garrison revolted, going over to the rebels along with its commander, Abdul Rauf, who, as a parting gift to the government, called in a Soviet helicopter for the sole purpose of shooting it down. In early 1980 yet another element of the 9th Division – the 30th Mountain Brigade – defected, leaving the division with barely 1,000 men under arms (Urban 1988: 55). The dramatic erosion of the DRA's military capabilities in Kunar province forced the Soviets to bolster the garrisons at Asadabad and Asmar with their own troops, as well as to bring significant force to bear in the hope of hammering the province into some sort of submission and re-establishing Kabul's authority.

The Mujahideen that the Soviets were to encounter in Kunar were not much different from other bands around the country; the fighters were all volunteers, and formed loose factional groups mostly tied down to their local areas within the province. The men who left to join the Mujahideen did so with no promise of payment or expectation of remuneration except through booty. Much effort would be expended on capturing weapons from Soviet or DRA sources, not so they could be turned on their former owners but rather so that they might be sold in the arms bazaars of Pakistan. The money fighters would garner from such sales would be sent home to their families; Nick Downie, an ex-SAS soldier turned film-maker who spent four months with the guerrillas in Kunar in 1979, came to the conclusion that 'most of them fought for the loot' (quoted in Urban 1988: 36). Gérard Challiand, a man with much field experience among guerrilla movements, thought that 'The Afghan insurgents know little of modern revolutionary war – its efficiency or organisation or careful planning of time and work' (quoted in Isby 1986: 23). The ideological basis for resistance was straightforward, rooted in generations of local independence and religious duty; for most fighters Islam was still mostly a dominating cultural factor rather than an overtly political one. The initial successes of such men would come in large part because they would fight as they always had, for the most traditional of reasons, against an enemy whose technological advantages turned to hindrances on a bad road in the high mountains.

The Kunar Valley, 29 February 1980

MAP KEY

1 **0500hrs:** Major Vasily Mikhailovich Kustrio's reinforced 3/317 lands on a mountainside to the northwest of Shigal village.

2 ***c.*0530–0630hrs:** The three companies leave the landing zone to envelop Shigal village and cut off the road to Asmar.

3 ***c.*0500–0700hrs:** The motorized force, consisting of 2/180, 3/350 and an Afghan infantry battalion from the 66th Infantry Regiment, sets out from Asadabad only to find its way blocked by a trench. The column comes under attack from various prepared Mujahideen positions.

4 ***c.*0800–1200hrs:** Captain Vladimir Hapin's company is attacked and his 2nd Platoon cut off.

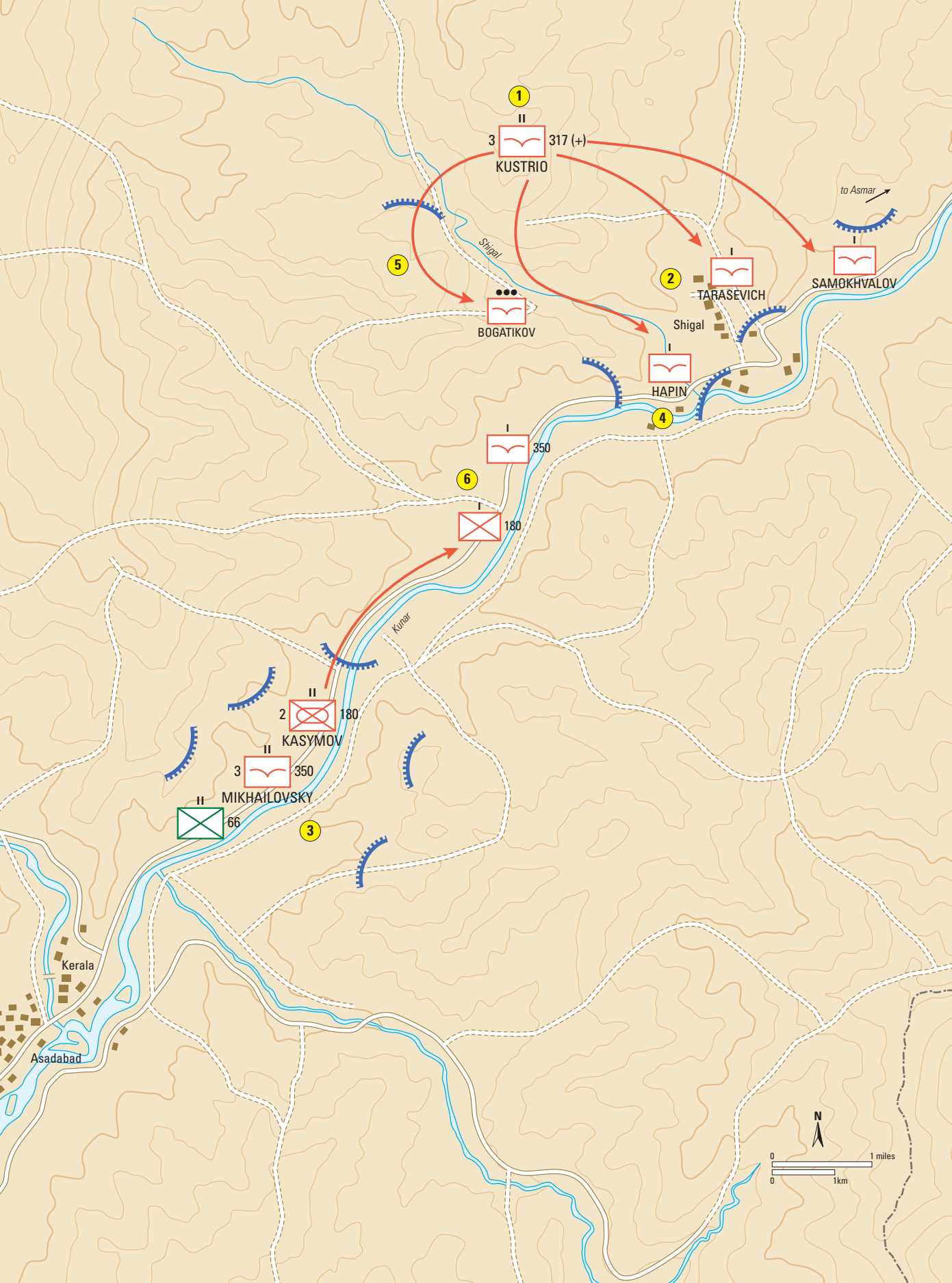
5 ***c.*1400hrs:** Lieutenant Sergey Bogatikov's platoon manoeuvres in support of Hapin's 9th Company.

6 ***c.*1700hrs:** Colonel-General Victor Abramovich Merimsky sends two dismounted companies (one from 2/180 and one from 3/350) to make their way up the road and join up with the paratroopers of 3/317.

Battlefield environment

Kunar province was dominated by almost impassably difficult mountainous terrain, with the few villages and towns of any size (like the regional capital Asadabad) nestled along the base of the Kunar river valley. The river ran south through Asadabad until it joined with the Kabul River near Jalalabad in the bordering Nangarhar province. The only road of any significance was the Kabul–Jalalabad–Asadabad highway that led to the Binshai Pass and Pakistan. Shigal was the principal waypoint on the Asadabad–Asmar section of the Kabul–Jalalabad–Asadabad highway, just under 10km (as the crow flies) from Asadabad to the south-west and 15km from Asmar to the north-east. The road followed the course of the valley's western side, its relatively narrow width winding along the mountains allowing little or no room for manoeuvre. It would prove to be both simple to block and a perfect environment for ambushes. The mountains surrounding Shigal were steep and difficult to navigate, with numerous gullies and ravines in the rocky landscape providing the defenders with many opportunities for concealment. All combat is dependent on terrain, but the Kunar Valley was to make particular demands on Soviet troops trained for the rolling ease of central Europe.

A view of a typical village nestled at the base of the Kunar Valley, taken *c.*1995. Most farming takes place by the fast-flowing Kunar River, with any land suitable for crops having been cleared of trees and undergrowth. The whole region is mountainous and almost impassable, making the river valley into the main route for cultivation, trade and passage. From the start of the war until its end the Kunar Valley would prove to be one of the most consistently hostile areas for OKSVA troops, and one of the most difficult in which they had to operate. (Photo by Francoise De Mulder/Roger Viollet/Getty Images)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INTO COMBAT

The first element of the operation to sweep the Kunar Valley was set for the morning of 29 February 1980, and would consist of a raid on the village of Shigal which lay on the Jalalabad–Asadabad–Barikot highway, roughly equidistant between Asadabad and Asmar. Judging by the proposed operation's timetable and allocated forces, the assumption seems to have been that the shock effect of an air-landing coupled with the strength of the motorized assault force would easily overcome any local resistance. The first mention of the operation is in the 40th Army's war diary on 28 February, where a few perfunctory sentences state that reconnaissance and preparation for the destruction of a large enemy force near Asadabad had been completed, and that, weather permitting, the following day would see the commencement of the attack. The mission was under the command of Colonel-General Victor Abramovich Merimsky, a veteran officer who had served in the Great Patriotic War and who was known to his subordinates as the 'Grey Death'. The Soviet/DRA forces allocated to the operation were: the 2nd Battalion, 180th Motor-Rifle Regiment (2/180) from the 108th Motor-Rifle Division; the 3rd Battalion, 317th Guards Parachute Regiment (3/317) and the 3rd Battalion, 350th Guards Parachute Regiment (3/350), both from the 103rd Guards Airborne Division; and a battalion from the Afghan 66th Infantry Regiment, 11th Division. Of the two airborne battalions, only 3/317 would be inserted by helicopter, 3/350 using its BMDs to form part of the armoured column.

The motorized contingent of the force was impressive on paper, but it had some significant weaknesses. Though the DRA forces operated according to Soviet doctrine using Soviet equipment, their training was usually poor and

Soviet sappers with bomb-sniffing dogs in the process of clearing a road, 20 September 1988. Mines were a constant worry, as one lieutenant recalled: 'This was the procedure: the dog ran zigzagging in front of us, followed by the sappers with their probing rods poking the soil as they went. All you had going for you was God, your sixth sense, experience and flair. You might notice a broken branch, or a bit of rusty iron, or a rock, which hadn't been there the day before. The muj would leave little markers like that to avoid getting blown up themselves … No two mine-traps are the same, but the worst are the homemade devices which never repeat themselves exactly. They might be hidden in a rusty tea-kettle, or a tape-recorder, watch, or can. Units who went out without sappers were known as "suicide squads". Mines were everywhere, on mountain paths, on the roads and in houses. It was always the sappers who went in first' (quoted in Alexievich 1992: 97–98). (TASS via Getty Images)

A wrecked 122mm D-30 howitzer near Asmar. Soviet expert Lester Grau describes the Soviet approach to tactical artillery deployment: 'Soviet offensive artillery support included general support, reinforcing and attached. The artillery fired to protect march columns, to protect advances, to prepare for attacks in cities and villages, to support block and sweep missions, and to provide indirect and direct fires during combat. When regiments and brigades went on the offensive, they employed their organic artillery and any artillery positioned within supporting range. Artillery attached to a regiment or brigade was usually reattached in direct support of a battalion. When artillery was attached in direct support, the most common attachment was an entire artillery battalion to a maneuver battalion. Sometimes a howitzer battery and a MRLS battery might support a maneuver battalion. Often Soviet commanders would attach a battery to a separate maneuver company. Mortars, which were part of Soviet artillery, were often attached to maneuver companies' (Grau 1997: 2). (Erwinlux)

their morale brittle. It was also the habit of Soviet sweeps of this period to use the Afghans as a vanguard, which was of some value when no resistance was offered, but caused all sorts of problems when it was. The Soviet elements were also hamstrung by the inappropriate tactics and equipment shortcomings that were to be a feature of many early engagements. The inadequacy of such units – their poor adaptability to mountain warfare, their shortage of effective offensive weaponry, and their staid and inefficient methods – would soon be laid bare. Later in the war such battalions would be bolstered by a company of tanks, one or two artillery batteries and a platoon of ZSU-23-4 *Shilka* anti-aircraft guns (proving to be horribly effective in the ground-support role), as well as enjoying dedicated artillery support and air cover (both rotary and fixed wing) if the mission was deemed important enough. Such changes were indicative of just how poorly fitted the early incarnations of motor-rifle battalions were to conduct counter-insurgency missions in the mountains.

Landing an airborne battalion in enemy territory was no simple task, even for well-trained troops, and there were many dynamic elements to monitor in such an undertaking:

> The combat formation for an air assault usually consisted of several groups. The first group was composed of Mi-24 HIND helicopter gunships, MIG-21 jet fighter-bombers, and SU-25 FROGFOOT close air support jet aircraft. This group suppressed enemy air defenses and conducted preparatory fires on the LZ. Mi-8mt armed helicopter lift ships followed this group and landed a group that seized the LZ. Part of this group were FACs [Forward Air Controllers] who adjusted helicopter gun ship strikes. The main body of the air assault followed this group in a flying column. Mi-6 helicopter transports and Mi-8mt armed helicopter lift ships flew in pairs, maintaining their intervals and distance, which made the flight safer, provided freedom of maneuver, and aided control. The number of helicopters in this group depended on their availability and the size of the assault force. In the event that there were not enough helicopters to lift the

> entire main body at once, the main body was carried in several lifts, although this had a negative impact on surprise, simultaneity, and massing of forces. (Russian General Staff 2002: 201)

In this instance there would prove to be a lack of coordination between the air-landed force and supporting air elements that would exacerbate the day's problems; air support was available, but tended to resolve itself into general strafing runs on the tops of the mountains (including the site of 3/317's headquarters on one unfortunate occasion), rather than specific targeting in support of hard-pressed troops lower down in the valley.

Major-General Ivan Fedorovich Ryabchenko, commander of the 103rd Guards Airborne Division, described how

> The plan was to insert the battalion of 317 Regiment by helicopter, high in the mountains, to surround the enemy and prevent them from disappearing into the mountains. The rest of the forces were to join up with the battalion within two hours. I was against the plan. I was not convinced that the troops would arrive within two hours. But the bosses had their way, as usual, and the operation was launched. We reinforced the battalion with AGS-17 and two platoons of 82mm grenade launchers. (Quoted in Schofield 1993: 61–62)

The landing zones and surrounding areas were 'softened up' with 238 sorties from 40 fixed-wing aircraft as well as a dozen Mi-24 helicopter gunships. The airlift itself was to be conducted by 28 Mi-8 transport helicopters. The two landing zones were on a peak 1,590m high to the north-west of the village; when they arrived the pilots found a heavy fog coated the ground, so the troopers, laden with ammunition, helmets and flak vests, had to leap 2–3m from the helicopters as they hovered; 350 men of Major Vasily Mikhailovich Kustrio's 3/317 with supporting reconnaissance and engineering platoons were dropped. Insertion in enemy territory was always

Men from the 56th Separate Guards Airborne Assault Brigade interrogate a prisoner in Wardak province, 1987. The old man in the picture was later released, a fortunate result in a conflict that was, in the main, unforgiving. The cycle of vengeful violence that was such a characteristic of the Soviet-Afghan War certainly extended to the treatment of prisoners; Yuri Yurchenko, who served in Afghanistan during the early 1980s, recalled his commanders' attitude to such men (and boys): 'Lieutenant Colonel Koshelyov personally checked to see that everything was in order. Finally, he said, "Remember, boys, that I don't need prisoners of war!" In spite of the lieutenant colonel's order, four captured guerrillas were brought to our company commander; they'd been found killing wounded soldiers. The commander wondered why we had taken prisoners. He ordered us to take them aside and shoot them immediately, which is what happened' (quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 25). (E. Kuvakin, Vizu/CC BY-SA 3.0)

fraught with peril, airborne soldier Yuri Tinkov, who fought in the early years of the war, recalling the moment when he had to leap from his helicopter into an unknown landing zone:

> Since we belonged to the intelligence troops, we had to jump out first and make sure that the other battalion could get down safely. The helicopter remained two meters above the ground. When I jumped down, my knees gave way from the weight of the equipment, and I rolled over twice. The helicopter's propellers were whizzing, and I thought it was the sound of bullets. (Quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 5)

The landing itself was unopposed, with Lieutenant Sergey Bogatikov, commander of the reconnaissance platoon, musing that the *dukhi* (ghosts) were dumbfounded by what had happened because they never expected the Soviets 'to organize and carry out a landing under their noses' (quoted in Pochtarev 2007) right in the heart of their fastness.

The brief reconnaissance that had been undertaken on the Shigal areas was done from the air and gave little sense of the Mujahideen positions or their real strength. As it happened, the ground on which 3/317 landed was a centre of resistance that was thick with fighters who, with the cessation of the artillery barrage and gunship attacks to clear the landing zones, began to converge on the battalion. Keeping the reconnaissance platoon in reserve, Major Kustrio's three companies quickly moved out: Captain Vladimir Tarasevich's 7th Company moved towards the northern outskirts of Shigal to interdict fleeing rebels, Captain Valery Samokhvalov's 8th Company moved to block the road from Asmar to secure the operation's flank against Mujahideen reinforcement, and Captain Vladimir Hapin's 9th Company was to make its

As the war progressed the Soviet attitude to the rural communities that so often seemed to support the insurgents hardened into an entirely brutal policy aimed directly at civilians and the places they lived. Mike Martin, a British journalist who travelled with the Mujahideen, observed how '"By the middle of 1983 the Russians seemed bankrupt of military ideas and had resorted to the widespread use of terror." Martin witnessed the use of jets for reprisal attacks on at least four occasions during his stay in Afghanistan. In one case, the Russians bombed a village for two weeks in retaliation for an attack on the outpost at Tagob. He described the Soviet attack as follows: "For days the jets flew low over the valley bombing the houses to dust. The worst destruction left you with a feeling that there had been no life there anyway: just mounds of rubble"' (quoted in Westermann 1999: 9). (Erwinlux)

way down the Shigal river gorge and come around, attacking the village from the south. The assumption was that the majority of the enemy would be in the village on the plain by the river, and that such an envelopment would either destroy them or hem them in until the main force arrived from the south to help finish the job. The combat-engineer platoon, commanded by Major Pavel Agafonov, was split into three sections, each section attaching to one of Kustrio's companies.

The paratroopers found themselves engaging the enemy not on the valley floor as they had anticipated but deep in the mountains soon after they had moved out from the landing zones, battling small bands of guerrillas that popped up, fired at them and then melted away in the face of the Soviet advance. The paratroopers were discovering what was to become one of the defining features of fighting the Mujahideen – their elusiveness: 'The Soviets quickly learned to respect and fear their opponents. The original term for the mujahideen, *dushmani* (bandits), slowly evolved into *dukhi* (ghosts) for their ability to come and go as they pleased' (Zaloga 1995: 241). Unfamiliar with fighting in mountainous terrain, the three companies moved quickly down the mountainside without flanking elements or rearguards, surrendering the higher ground behind them as they went. Small bands of Mujahideen around 15–20 men strong took advantage of the loose Soviet organization and their own intimate knowledge of the terrain to slip around the sides of the companies, some even inserting themselves between the units; smaller groups also went to ground, letting the *desantniki* ('landers') advance over them before shooting at their flanks and rear, inflicting casualties and causing confusion. Hapin's company had to fight off two groups that had made their way around his company's rear, eventually beating them back before carrying on down the mountain.

Major-General Ryabchenko acknowledged the error: 'The battalion [from the 317th] landed at 05.00, and was very quickly surrounded by the enemy. At this stage the officers made a stupid mistake, and began to move down the mountain. But they thought that they would be relieved, within four hours at the worst' (quoted in Schofield 1993: 62). The situation became more serious for Captain Hapin's 9th Company; in the confusion of the incessant rebel attacks his advance into the Shigal river valley had become disordered, allowing the Mujahideen to cut off his 2nd Platoon. Surrounded and fighting for their lives, the Soviets found that their situation was soon desperate. All three companies were engaged in rolling firefights, often conducted at little more than hand-grenade range; the Afghans made a particular effort to kill or wound radiomen and officers, while the *desantniki* tried to continue on their way down the mountain, dragging their dead and wounded with them.

For the convoy moving up the road from Asadabad, always under the watchful eyes of numerous insurgent lookouts, there were several unwelcome surprises in the form of mines and ambushes. The situation was exacerbated by the lack of any sort of reconnaissance prior to setting out, the most serious consequence of which was the discovery that the Mujahideen had blown a trench across the road over 5m wide and 2–3m deep that made it impassable for vehicles; with mountains to one side and the Kunar River to the other, there was no way to manoeuvre around the obstacle. The convoy, anticipating

Soviet troops riding in relative comfort atop BTRs. Motorized units were usually wedded to their vehicles, but airborne soldiers could find themselves acting in a mechanized role in BMDs, delivered into a set position by heliborne assault, or inserted deep in enemy territory, again by helicopter, with often hours of hard climbing ahead to reach their objective, carrying everything they needed on their own backs. One soldier recalled the effort involved in the latter case: 'Mountain operations? Well, you carry your gun, obviously, and a double issue of ammo, about 10 kilos of it, plus a mine, that's another 10 kilos, plus grenades, flak-jacket, dry rations. It comes to at least 40 kilos. I've seen men so wet with sweat they look as though they've been standing in torrential rain' (quoted in Alexievich 1992: 128). (TASS via Getty Images)

nothing like this, had failed to bring along any engineering vehicles to deal with such problems. In addition, the rebels had set up numerous well-prepared strongpoints in the mountains overlooking the roadway, giving them fine fields of fire on the stalled line of armour. It was clear that the initial plan of linking up with the paratroopers within two hours, four at the worst, was wishful thinking, Ryabchenko describing how 'We had to order the [317th] battalion to forget the mission assigned, and concentrate on defending itself, which it did, for the next twenty-four hours' (quoted in Schofield 1993: 62).

The fighting on the mountain continued apace, sometimes devolving into hand-to-hand combat, as the three companies engaged in a series of individual battles. Yuri Tinkov remembered the skill that the Mujahideen displayed in his first engagement with them: 'When I looked around me, I noticed that about fifty guerrillas were coming toward us. The guerrillas shot accurately. Apparently they had been prepared to meet up with us for a long time. They knew that we wore bulletproof vests, so they shot at our hands and heads' (quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 6). Such competence was unexpected and unnerving, and took a heavy toll in both wounded and dead. The *dukhi* attacks were unrelenting, especially on the 9th Company and its stranded platoon which could do little but keep fighting and wait to be rescued. Sergeant Nikolai Chepik of the 317th's combat-engineer platoon was attached to Hapin's company and had been wounded by a bullet through

Nikolai Chepik

Nikolai Petrovich Chepik was born 16 April 1960 in a small village in the Pukhovichi District near Minsk in Belarus. After leaving school he worked as a fitter on the railways in Minsk, but early in 1978 he was drafted into the Army, where he was selected for the VDV. Having completed his training he was assigned to the combat-engineer company of the 317th Guards Parachute Regiment in late autumn 1978, where he made a good impression; Major Pavel Agafonov, Chepik's commander, remembered him 'as a simple country boy with a strong Belarusian accent, a very diligent lad and good sergeant. He always got stuck in to all company matters, and never with a word of grumbling' (Agafonov 2010). When Chepik's platoon lost its second-in-command, he was an obvious choice for the position. Chepik's platoon was assigned to support the companies of 3/317 in the attack on Shigal village, with Chepik's section detailed to Captain Hapin's ill-fated 9th Company. He was a few months shy of his 20th birthday when he died. His actions that day earned him lasting fame in the ranks of the VDV, and also saw him made a Hero of the Soviet Union.

the leg on the way down the mountain. Having gone to ground he was soon faced with intense enemy attempts to take him; he fought hard to defend his position against the rebels who were crowding in, but the numbers he was facing could not be overcome. Understanding that there was no way out, Chepik tied a MON-100 anti-personnel mine to a tree and waited until the Mujahideen were right on top of his position before he detonated it, killing himself along with 32 of his attackers.

Meanwhile, over on the 7th Company's left flank, Senior Sergeant Alexander Mironenko, deputy commander of the reconnaissance platoon, was cut off with three of his scouts. The company was being hard-pressed by various groups of Mujahideen whose intention was to encircle the unit completely. Mironenko volunteered himself and his small force as a rearguard to allow the company some breathing space, and was soon surrounded himself. Lacking a radio he tried to signal his position using flares, but the situation soon proved to be hopeless; he found himself alone, all ammunition expended, his comrades dead and the enemy rushing at him, so he blew himself up with an F1 *limonka* hand grenade, taking nearly a dozen Mujahideen with him as he did so.

Lieutenant Bogatikov's reconnaissance platoon had been held in reserve and was eager to join the fight, but Major Kustrio held Bogatikov back at first, saying 'There'll be plenty of fighting for everybody, but we don't know where it'll be the hardest. Go and get your platoon ready' (quoted in Pochtarev 2007). Soon enough Bogatikov got his chance and set out, manoeuvring his platoon around the heights rather than following the path of the other companies into the valley, instinctively understanding that it was folly to cede the advantage of high ground. Moving along ridgelines towards the Shigal river valley so that they could cover Hapin's 9th Company, the men of Bogatikov's platoon were soon fighting off a series of increasingly determined rebel attacks launched from all about them, including from above. The attacks became so intense that Bogatikov took two men and covered the platoon's movement himself, eventually pulling through with only one man wounded after inflicting a significant number of casualties on his persistent enemy: 'The fire of the Scouts proved to be very effective in this situation because they strictly followed the rule "Don't see – don't shoot"' (Pochtarev 2007).

Mohammad Yunus Khalis

Mawlawi Mohammad Yunus Khalis was born *c.*1919 in the Khogyani district of Nangarhar province near the border with Pakistan. A clever and politically adept man, Khalis, like many of the leaders of the resistance, exercised influence because of his traditional social status rather than any overt military competence. He joined Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's revolutionary Hezb-e-Islami in 1973, an important year that saw many of Afghanistan's more independently minded leaders flee to Pakistan in the wake of Mohammed Daoud Khan's coup on 17 July. After his split from the intolerant and bellicose Hekmatyar he established his own more moderate version of his erstwhile leader's party, and though it never rivalled Hekmatyar's group in size, it quickly gained a reputation as a competent and active military force that would prove to be a significant thorn in the Soviet side. Khalis's organization was decentralized, with military control of fighting groups resting in the hands of local commanders, but Khalis was a unifying figure whose leadership knitted together disparate guerrilla groups across north-eastern Afghanistan. Khalis was also unusual among rebel commanders for his active involvement in the war, often crossing the border from the relative safety of Pakistan to personally lead operations. He survived the war and remained a man of significant influence in his region until his death in 2006.

Well trained, well motivated and well led, the reconnaissance platoon came through the battle almost unscathed and certainly in much better shape than the parachute companies further down the hill. Bogatikov's relocation had been achieved with his force's firepower undiminished, allowing him to provide much-needed support to Hapin's beleaguered company.

The desperate nature of the paratroopers' situation around Shigal forced Merimsky to think again; the road was impassable for vehicles, and would remain so for the immediate future, so he detailed two companies (one rifle company from 2/180 and one of paratroopers from 3/350) to dismount and make their way on foot up the road to join up with the paratroopers. As the reinforcements worked their way along the road to the paratroopers, the hilltops around Shigal were under constant attack by Mi-24 helicopter gunships, scattering bands of Mujahideen who had few weapons with which to fend them off; nine helicopters were damaged by ground fire, most likely from a ZU-23-2 towed anti-aircraft autocannon or a 12.7mm DShK heavy machine gun, but none was brought down. As the day drew into evening the link-up was finally achieved and the day's fighting gradually died away, the bands of Mujahideen disappearing into the folds and gullies of the mountains. The following morning the newly combined force went on the offensive up the road towards Asmar, finally completing what was supposed to have been a one-day raid on the valley three days later on 3 March.

Major-General Ryabchenko noted of the action on 29 February that 'Of the 350 men who had landed, in the reinforced battalion, about thirty-eight were killed. We lost five when one of our helicopters opened fire on our command post. We learnt fast in Afghanistan' (quoted in Schofield 1993: 62). One man, Sergeant Ivan Tabakov, was injured and taken prisoner, carried across the border into Pakistan, and there were also 26 other wounded. Nikolai Chepik and Alexander Mironenko were lionized for their self-sacrifice, both being awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union, the first such honours of the war. Mujahideen and civilian casualties were not accurately recorded, though they would likely have been higher, probably running into the hundreds.

Two Soviet soldiers, taken prisoner by the Afghan resistance forces loyal to the fundamentalist faction of Hezb-i-Islami in the southern Afghan province of Zabul, September 1981, await an uncertain fate at the hands of their captors. Soviet troops quickly learned to dread falling into the hands of the Mujahedeen, where death, if it came, would usually not be easy. Mutilation of Soviet corpses was common, the wounded were often tortured horribly, and the unluckiest of all would be turned into 'puppets', a practice described by the veteran Ruslan Kust: 'A puppet is a person whose arms and legs have been cut off. The eyes are gouged out of the sockets. Only the tongue is left, with which the victim could plead, "Friends! Shoot me!" The guerrillas threw these puppets in front of our columns, so that we'd know what they'd do to us. In my opinion, these puppets were the most ghastly thing of all that happened in Afghanistan. Being turned into a puppet like that could happen to anyone' (quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 107). (AFP/Getty Images)

The fight around Shigal was only the overture to the rest of the operation. Large Soviet and DRA tank-heavy mechanized forces set out in early March, their way cleared by intense artillery bombardment, the defence analyst Mark Urban recording how

> The armoured task force made its way up the valley. It took supplies to the beleaguered garrison in Asadabad, re-established authority in Asmar, and pushed on to the end of the valley at Barikot. The operation was largely complete by 15 March. Throughout its advance the division had come under repeated ambush from the guerrillas. The operation eliminated the guerrillas from the valley (for a few days) and did do something to take the pressure off the 9th Division. Its most alarming effect was in the accelerated depopulation of the valley. (Urban 1988: 61)

The short campaign had resulted in approximately 1,000 Mujahideen and civilian deaths, and had re-established a degree of stability in Asadabad, but such successes would prove to be written in sand.

Soviet tactics would adapt, forcing the Mujahideen to change in turn, but such evolution came in fits and starts, its effects not being felt for some months. In March the Soviets pushed into Paktia, losing an entire motorized battalion in the process, followed by assaults in the Panjshir (Panjshir I in September, Panjshir II in October) and Ghazni in May and June, as well as further sweeps of the Kunar Valley in May, September and November, none of which brought decisive victories. By year's end it was clear for anyone who cared to look that not just tactics but strategy would have to change if OKSVA were to have any chance of bringing the truculent Afghans to heel.

Panjshir V

15–21 May 1982

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

The Panjshir Valley was an uncomfortable thorn in the side of the Soviet occupying forces almost from the very start of the war. Located only a few hours' drive north of Kabul, it was a threat to the strategically vital airbase at Bagram, as well as to the Salang Pass through which the Soviet logistical lifeline flowed. The first significant attempts to suppress rebel activity in the valley came in April 1980, followed by further sweeps in September and October (Panjshir I and II); they quickly demonstrated the shortcomings of Soviet assumptions, as noted by Sergeant Sergei Morozov of the 56th Separate Guards Airborne Assault Brigade, who recalled his experiences trying to subdue the valley during Panjshir I:

> This was the first operation where we met major resistance. There were ambushes, the roads were blown up. Of course I did not know exactly what was going on because I was only a sergeant. We drove as far as we could and then dismounted. After leaving the *kishlak* which had housed [Khalid Sheik] Masud's headquarters, we marched right to the end of the Pandsher Valley. It was the furthest anyone got during the whole war, and very close to the Pakistan frontier. On the way back along the mountain path, my battalion was ambushed. Thirteen men were killed in the leading platoon. My own platoon had been in the lead on the way out and so we were in the rearguard on the way back. We stopped for the night and had to beat off a number of mujahedin attacks. Their weapons in those days were simple, many of them home-made. They didn't get mortars until later. The numbers opposing us were very small – perhaps only a few dozen. We had helicopter cover throughout, though not of course at night. (Quoted in Braithwaite 2011: 218)

An Mi-8 'Hip' transport helicopter flies above freshly landed Afghan Army troops during an operation, 2 May 1986. Highly versatile and capable of operating in the thin air of the high mountains where so many airborne and special-forces operations were conducted, the Mi-8 had a crew of three and could take up to 26 passengers or 3,000kg of cargo (though this was reduced to something more like 10–12 men at high altitudes, and could be lowered even further if troops had to exit the helicopter quickly in 'hot' landings where the machine wasn't able to tarry). With a range of over 600km, a cruising speed of around 230km/h and the capability to carry four UB-16-57 unguided rocket pods (16 55mm S-5 unguided rockets per pod) as well as a pair of 7.62×54mmR PK machine guns, it seemed to be an ideal machine for air-assault operations, but it had its weaknesses: it was poorly armoured, especially in comparison to the Mi-24 'Hind' helicopter gunship (though such a trade-off with carrying capacity is understandable), it could only disembark one man at a time through its side door, and the rear cargo doors could only be opened from the outside, problems that would not be rectified until several years after the war ended. (TASS via Getty Images)

That such attempts had failed to suppress Massoud's activities became clear enough in April 1982 when his forces launched a successful attack on Bagram, penetrating the airbase's defences and destroying 23 aircraft. Deciding to solve the problem of the Panjshir once and for all, the 40th Army began planning a massive coordinated assault on the whole valley. The best estimate of OKSVA was that Massoud had up to 5,000 guerrillas in the valley, organized into a widely distributed defensive network:

> The Mujahideen defense was designed using the mountainous characteristics of the terrain. Basically, the defense consisted of individual strong points located on dominant heights, in canyons, and in various excellent defensive positions. Strong points were also established in fortresses and the outskirts of villages. Every strong point was defended by a garrison of 10 to 20 men and equipped with several firing points made out of stone. The staffs and Islamic committee centers were spread out, as a rule, in the best guarded points. Each was guarded by a 30-to-50 man detachment armed with small arms and man-portable air defense missiles. Mujahideen artillery firing positions were located near thoroughly camouflaged crevices and caves. The artillery pieces and mortars were kept under cover and only set up in the firing positions during fire missions. This type of defense used significantly fewer forces to control the region and was much harder to find with reconnaissance and to engage with artillery and air strikes. (Russian General Staff 2002: 74)

A diversionary attack would be made north-west up the Ghorband river valley, while the main thrust would set of from Bagram and strike into the western entrance of the Panjshir Valley, pushing north-east along the valley basin. The ground advance would be supported by air strikes as well as a series of air assaults on key targets along the length of the Panjshir (from west to east: Rukha, Khanez, Bazarak, Astana, Khenj, Pasi-Sheun-Mardan, Kure Mirzabeg and Evim). The planning and preparation was consistent with the size of the proposed operation, starting in early May:

> The operations section of the 40th Army worked up maps depicting the starting situation as well as their initial combat deployment. They worked out signals for troop control, instructions for equipping the force, and ordered flights to obtain aerial photographs of the future combat region. All of these documents were placed in sealed envelopes that were delivered to the division and regimental commanders at the 40th Army headquarters just five days before the start of the offensive. (Russian General Staff 2002: 77)

Such attention to detail started to break down, however, when the time came to share information with their DRA counterparts. Due to the quite reasonable lack of trust the Soviets had in their Afghan allies, such matters were compressed to their barest essentials and the briefings left until the last minute in an attempt to mitigate against the inevitable leakage of information to the enemy.

The Soviet ground element consisted of the 108th and 201st Motor-Rifle divisions as well as elements of the 860th and 191st Separate Motor-Rifle regiments; the air assaults would be conducted by the 103rd Guards Airborne Division and 345th Separate Guards Parachute Regiment, Afghan commando units and air-landing-trained motorized infantry. Aside from additional artillery and air assets, other supporting elements included motor-rifle regiments and special forces from the DRA, bringing the strength of the entire force up to around 12,000 men. Close attention was paid to ensure that

> air assault issues were resolved, such as loading and landing procedures and fire suppression of the enemy located nearby the LZs. Commanders of the air assault units were divided among the lifts. Thus, the regimental or brigade commander would fly in after the first lift had secured the LZs. He would then take command of the air assault while one of his deputies at the airfield organized the dispatch of the helicopters and the launch of subsequent lifts. These measures prevented the accumulation of forces at the air field and supported the organization of the air assault in the assigned region. (Russian General Staff 2002: 78)

The process of inspections, training and preparation signalled to the men of the airborne battalions that something was coming. Igor Ponomarenko, a paratrooper whose unit had recently moved to Baghlan on 14 May, remembered how 'During the afternoon of the second day they distributed ammunition to us … We took three days' dry rations with us. They included buckwheat and oatmeal porridge, canned meat, sugar, tea, hardtack, and ordinary crackers. Everyone took along two loaves of bread as well, if they fit into his knapsack' (quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 35).

Guerrillas help a wounded man back to a remote base in the Safed Koh mountains, 10 February 1988. Battlefield injuries were invariably serious for the Mujahideen, who often lacked medicinal supplies and the trained personnel to make the most of them, as well as a reliable medical infrastructure to deal with anything more serious than minor wounds. Proper care meant trekking to mountain aid stations or a trip across the border into Pakistan. The Soviet forces, theoretically much better supplied, would often scavenge first-aid materials from captured or dead Mujahideen to replace their dire equipment with the much more advanced supplies from the West, including Japanese syringes, French and German field dressings, Italian plasma (in polyethylene bags, as opposed to the Soviet-supplied version that came in heavy glass bottles) and British inflatable splints (Alexievich 1992: 48). (Robert Nickelsberg/Liaison/Getty)

Panjshir V, 15–21 May 1982

MAP KEY

1 15 May: The Soviets launch a diversionary attack northwest into the Ghorband river valley in the hope of misleading Ahmad Shah Massoud and drawing off some of the defenders of the Panjshir.

2 0400hrs, 17 May: The main ground assault is launched on the entrance to the valley through the Dalang Sang gorge. At 0500hrs, six battalions begin landing in air assaults on Rukha (one from the 191st Separate Motor-Rifle Regiment and one from the DRA's 14th Division), Khanez and Bazarak, inserted on the surrounding peaks as well as the valley floor.

3 17 May: Soviet/DRA forces progress into the valley and take Anava.

4 18 May: Air assaults are launched on Khanez (two battalions: one from the 66th Separate Motor-Rifle Brigade and one from the DRA's 11th Division), Kharu and Khenj (one battalion from the 345th Separate Guards Parachute Regiment and one battalion from the Afghan 444th Commando Regiment).

5 19 May: Two battalions are air-landed at Astana (one from the 149th Guards Motor-Rifle Regiment and one from the Afghan 20th Division) with another two battalions inserted in the towns of Mata and Pasi-Sheun-Mardan (one from the 350th Guards Parachute Regiment, the other from the DRA's 37th Commando Brigade).

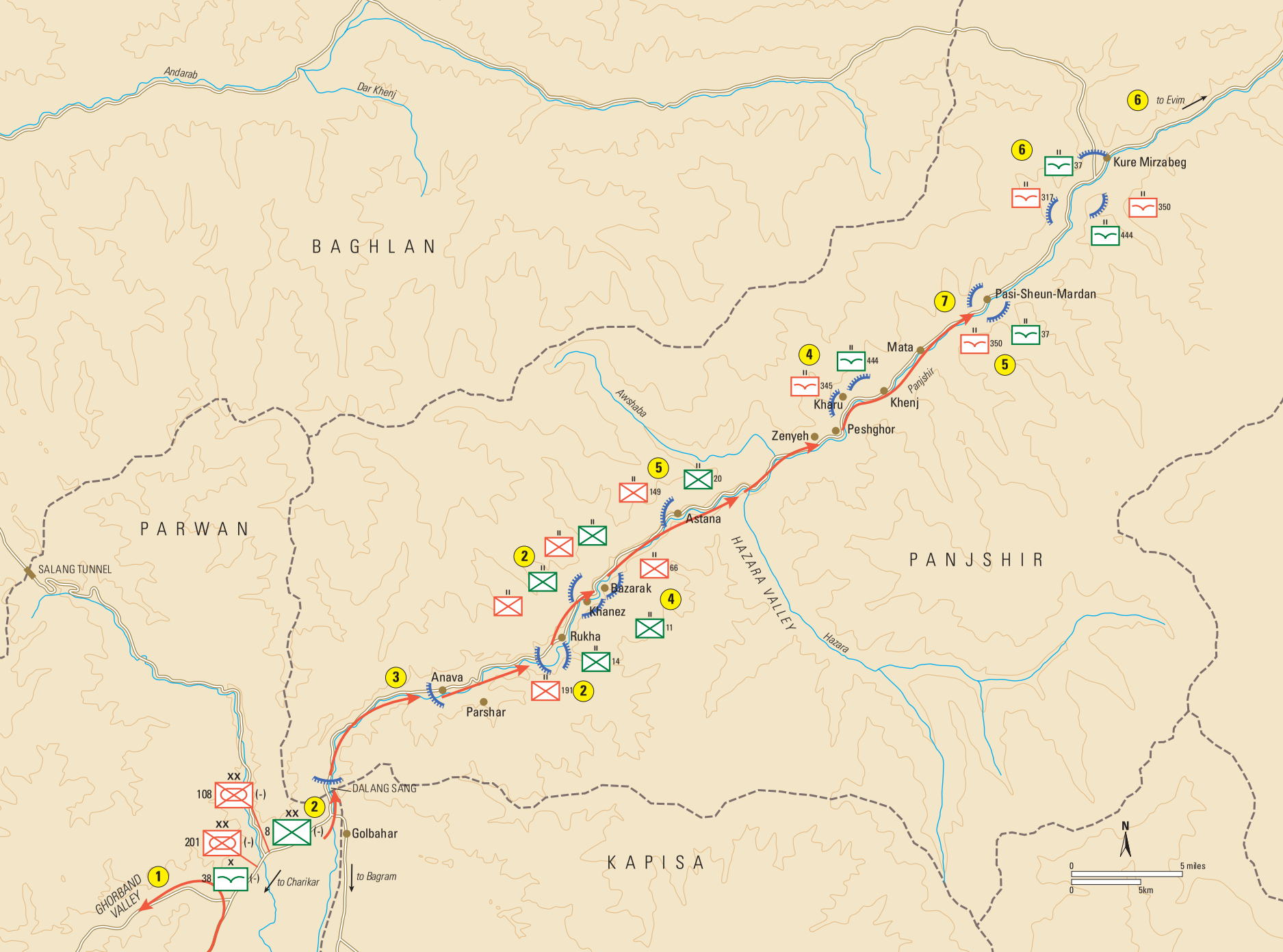
6 20 May: Air-landing in the vicinity of Kure Mirzabeg (one battalion each from the 317th and 350th Guards Parachute regiments, the Afghan complement being a battalion each from the 444th Commando Regiment and the 37th Commando Brigade). Nearly 40km further up the valley, two more battalions (one Soviet, one Afghan) are air-landed on the peaks near Evim to interdict the nearby road junction.

7 21 May: By the close of the day Soviet/DRA ground forces enter Mata and Pasi-Sheun-Mardan and link up with the air-assault troops holding those areas.

Battlefield environment

The 160km-long Panjshir Valley (literally the 'Valley of the Five Lions') lies some 90km north of Kabul, and was of strategic importance first because of its proximity to the Salang Pass (which was the key line of communication between Kabul and the Soviet Union), and second because at its easternmost end it contained the Khawak and Anjoman passes that allowed access (difficult in summer, impossible in winter) across the Hindu Kush, and were thus important supply routes for the Mujahideen. Isolated and poor, the population of the Panjshir is rural, drawn from mostly Tajik stock, with an economy dominated by agriculture. Rodric Braithwaite describes it thus: 'From the town of Charikar you pass through a narrow gorge, the Dalang Sang. The Pandsher River foams along, up to sixty feet [18m] below you, and the road clings to the sheer rock face on your left. It was along this narrow road that the Russians had to funnel their soldiers, their guns, and their armour as they stormed the valley time and again in the first five years of the war … From Charikar to the upper end of the valley is more than a hundred miles [161km]. During the Russian time the road petered out after fifty-three miles [85km]. After that you had to proceed on foot or on horseback, over increasingly rugged country, until you were up among the glaciers of the Hindu Kush, between ten and twenty thousand feet [*c.*3,000–6,100m] high and very close to the border with Pakistan and China' (Braithwaite 2011: 217).

A view of the Panjshir river valley taken in May 2011. The lushness of the valley floor is immediately apparent, as is the closeness of the encroaching hillsides. The valley was a fluctuating patchwork of farmland, watercourses, villages, hills, gullies, small outcrops of woodland, rough stone and scrub, all enclosed on both sides by serried ranks of forbidding mountains. Airborne soldier Igor Ponomarenko who campaigned in the valley remembered that: 'Panjshir actually isn't one pass, but rather a cluster, a whole cluster of labyrinthine corridors and passes which spread out into beautiful and broad valleys between high chains of mountains' (quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 36). (Master Sergeant Michael O'Connor, USAF/CC BY-SA 3.0)


Andarab
Dar Kheni
BAGHLAN
6
to Evim
6
II
37
Kure Mirzabeg
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317
II
350
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Pasi-Sheun-Mardan
II
350
II
37
5
4
II
444
Mata
II
345
Kharu
Khenj
Panjshir
Awshaba
Zenyeh
Peshghor
5
II
20
II
149
Astana
PARWAN
2
II
66
Bazarak
Khanez
4
II
11
Rukha
HAZARA VALLEY
Hazara
PANJSHIR
SALANG TUNNEL
II
14
3
Anava
II
191
2
Parshar
xx
108
(-)
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DALANG SANG
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1
GHORBAND VALLEY
to Charikar
to Bagram
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INTO COMBAT

On 15 May the battle that would develop into Panjshir V started with the diversionary feint towards Ghorband, while the main Soviet/DRA forces readied themselves for the strike into the Panjshir:

> The two days of the first phase were sufficient to concentrate and deploy the main groups of Soviet and Afghan forces north of Bagram at the entry to the Panjshir river valley. The 40th Army operations group command post was also deployed there. They were joined by the columns of personnel carriers of the air assault battalions loaded with supplies for 12 to 15 days of combat. The personnel of the air assault subunits remained in their base camp. (Russian General Staff 2002: 77)

The main assault began at 0400hrs on 17 May, heralded by a massive artillery bombardment on the Panjshir's entrance in concert with rolling air strikes that hammered the entire length of the valley, closely followed by air assaults in the heart of the valley by six battalions in the first few hours.

The Mujahideen were caught off guard. The Soviets had let misinformation slip out in the expectation of fooling the rebels in the Panjshir as to their true plan, but though it was successful in part Massoud, whose intelligence network was extensive and resilient, was usually much better informed about the lie of the land than his enemies would have credited. Even without information leaking from DRA informants the habitual nature of Soviet preparations for a major operation usually gave them away. A case in point was the formal inspection of a unit's arms and equipment (*stroevoy smotr*, 'full-field layout') just before the start of an offensive; this was an exhausting and exhaustive process 'where all the unit's equipment is laid out on tarps in front of the combat vehicles. It is a stringent inspection, more appropriate for peacetime, that has little to do with combat readiness but does account for equipment availability' (Russian General Staff 2002: 333–34). Such antics spoke more to the Soviets' bureaucratic mind than to their practical one; the inspections were carried out in the open, in full view of the local Afghans working in and around the camp, so rebel commanders usually had at least several days' notice that a storm was brewing, which was more than enough time to amend their dispositions accordingly.

In this instance Massoud's general intelligence about Soviet intentions was good, but there were several crucial aspects that his spies missed. He knew about the diversionary manoeuvres towards Ghorband, but he was certainly wrong-footed by the scale and reach of the air assaults that were to pepper the length of the valley. Abdullah Shariat, a Mujahid fighter and associate of the rebel commander, recalled that

> Masoud knew the date of the attack, but not the details. He thought it would be like the fourth and other previous attacks. In contrast, the Red Army suddenly arrived, using 200 helicopters to land 2,000–3,000 commandos. This caught our Mujahideen totally by surprise. We had planned to inflict the same heavy casualties as they had before but suddenly, the Soviets were spread all over the Panjshir Valley and difficult and dangerous to engage. (Davies & Shariat 2004: 168)

A 120mm 2S9 NONA self-propelled mortar. Aside from garrison protection and fire-support missions for large operations such as those conducted in the Panjshir Valley, Soviet artillery practice evolved as the war progressed, developing into a reasonably effective tool for supporting smaller-scale (company to battalion-sized) operations of airborne and air-assault infantry, usually in the shape of the 2S9 (based on the BTR-D chassis) and the 122mm 2S1 *Gvozdika* ('Carnation') self-propelled howitzer (based on the MT-LB chassis). Such weapons 'were best suited to support raiding motorized rifle or air assault forces. They usually deployed by battery or battalion. Prior to the raid, the Soviet planners determined initial targets from aerial, visual and artillery reconnaissance. They usually fired a three-five minute artillery preparation on those targets … While pitched battles occurred, the most common activity for raiding Soviet forces was pursuit of a withdrawing enemy. Mujahideen would usually leave a rear guard to slow down the attacker while the main body escaped. The rear guard would try to stay within 200–300 meters of the Soviet force to escape Soviet air and artillery. In that case, the Soviet forward observer would spot his first round some 200 meters beyond the enemy and then walk the rounds back onto the enemy' (Grau 1997: 4). (One half 3544/CC BY-SA 3.0)

As the main ground force started to push its way through the Salang Dang into the valley proper, Afghan and Soviet air-landing forces were making their presence felt near Rukha, Khanez and Bazarak. Igor Ponomarenko took part in the air assaults:

> We climbed into the helicopters, 10–12 men in each one … We were taken to Panjshir. What was involved was a big operation, and the paratroop landing was more massive than usual. When we rose into the air, I noticed the size of the helicopter squadron. As soon as one detachment had landed they left to fetch the next one and then the next. (Quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 36)

Some units were dropped along mountain ridges to secure the high ground and cover potential lines of retreat; the journalist Edward Girardet was in the Panjshir at the time of the offensive, and witnessed some of the air-assault landings that caused such surprise and consternation among the rebels: 'While Mi-6 and Mi-8 helicopters, with Mi-24 gunships circling protectively overhead, deposited commandos on the mountain ridges, others were dropped on the valley floor. From there, they sought to work their [way] up to the guerrilla positions, ensconced along the slopes' (Girardet 2012: 83). Ponomarenko's battalion had landed like those that Girardet had watched taking the valley floor, with the aim of striking upwards into the surrounding mountains:

> Finally the whole battalion was assembled … and for the first and last time I heard an assignment which we were supposed to carry out formulated with adequate clarity. We were to move to the closest mountain ridge, take control of it, and move forward. Forward to *where* remained unclear, but at that time, it wasn't thought to have any major significance. The most important thing was to get to the first ridge alive and unhurt. (Quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 36)

The soldiers formed up and moved out through green fields dusted with spring flowers, into a series of confusing firefights as they hunted the ever-elusive *dukhi*. Abdullah Shariat remembered how

> Almost immediately, heavy fighting started in the middle of the Panjshir Valley in an area called Rukha. The commander, Gul Haidar, shot down five helicopters

Mi-24 helicopter gunships support ground operations, 1984. The Mi-24 was one of the most potent weapons in the Soviet arsenal, David Isby noting how 'The Afghans hate and fear helicopters – especially the Mi-24 Hind attack helicopter – more than anything else' (Isby 1986: 14). Used as escorts for convoys (both in the air and on the ground), it was vital in close air-support operations and was 'widely used for clearing and securing landing zones for Mi-8MTs tasked with delivering heliborne assault parties. The Mi-24V/P's Shturm-V anti-tank guided missiles were a commonly used weapon in such missions … while area saturation just before landing of the Mi-8T/MTs with assault parties was performed using S-5/S-8 rockets or cluster bombs. The main emphasis of Mi-24 strike operations involved a sudden fire attack and mutual support. The combined bomb- and rocket-attack passes were performed with the rockets fired first, then hosing the target with machine gun or the 30mm cannon fire, then dropping bombs fitted with delayed-action fuses. Bombs proved to be particularly effective weapons in the mountains, whereas rockets fired at opposition strongholds had only a limited destructive effect. When helicopters were performing CAS missions, bombs could be used no closer to Soviet troops than 4,920ft (1,500m), and rocket and machine gun fire were to no closer than 1,640ft and 990ft (500m and 300m) respectively. For area suppression and action against personnel in the open RBK-250 cluster bombs were occasionally also employed' (Mladenov 2010: 30). (US Department of Defense/CC BY-SA 3.0)

using a captured Zigoiak, a Soviet 14.5mm heavy machine-gun [KPV/ZSU anti-aircraft gun], killing nearly 100 Soviets. His Mujahideen [counter-attacked] the Soviets and captured 40 AK47s, three pieces of heavy artillery, three RPG7s and two long range rockets. (Davies & Shariat 2004: 169)

The extent of such claims are difficult to substantiate, but the air-assault forces certainly did lose helicopters in the first few days of operations – after the battle even the Soviets admitted that they took unexpected losses from Massoud's air defences, sparse though they were. Edward Girardet saw scores of helicopters (Mi-24s, Mi-8s and a few Mi-6s) making their way to the northern end of the valley where the fighting was at its most fierce. He noted how

> At the time of the May 1982 offensive Massoud's forces possessed fewer than a dozen anti-aircraft guns. These were positioned at strategic spots along upper regions of the rocky and sparsely vegetated escarpments. Limited though they were, the weapons were not without effect; the guns forced the helicopters to fly high and come in low only to attack. Below one gun position, I could see the mangled remains of two helicopters littering the valley floor, but it was impossible to identify their type. 'If we had more guns, bigger guns, we'd be able to shoot them all down', vowed a heavily bearded unit commander. (Girardet 2012: 84)

For the paratroopers, after securing the landing zones that were crucial to the following waves of reinforcements, the job became one of destroying enemy strongpoints, taking key positions in the surrounding mountains, and securing a defensible perimeter as they waited to link up with the motorized columns grinding their way up the valley. Such tasks were not made any easier by the fact that the *desantniki* had to carry everything they might need on their own backs. Igor Ponomarenko was sanguine about the load he and his fellow paratroopers were expected to carry up into the mountains:

> Everyone could take as much [ammunition] as he wanted and was able to carry. I took with me three packets of cartridges and seven hand grenades. The trench mortar platoon gave us ten cylindrical grenades to carry which were used in the [AGS-17] grenade machine gun. The trench mortar platoon had plenty to carry otherwise. A grenade machine gun is no lightweight weapon when you drag it into the mountains. We also had to carry two or three mines per man. Those mines made us look very exotic. The mines were tied to each other and this ferocious-looking ornament was hung around your neck. So that the concept is complete, I should add as well that I had on a vest that was packed full of assault rifle

> ammunition clips and a sun hat. I tried my best to get rid of the helmet and oxygen mask, which I succeeded in doing later. Even without them I had a little less than fifty kilograms of luggage hanging on my back – just the right amount, when you contemplate climbing. (Quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 35–36)

The Mujahideen who had rushed to defend the western entrance to the Panjshir could only hope to delay such a large-scale attack (in part by dynamiting the walls of the gorge), but the weight of the forces pressing against them was overwhelming; intense artillery bombardment and relentless air strikes dislodged the rebels from their prepared positions, allowing the motorized forces into the valley proper. Moving in a broad front made up of three columns, the Soviet forces manoeuvred along both sides of the river, though progress was slow – 1–2km per hour – as the advance guard (a motor-rifle battalion reinforced with tanks and self-propelled artillery) kept the enemy at bay while the Movement Support Detachment (MSD) cleared the main approach. The MSD 'had a mine neutralization platoon, a sapper company, an engineer road repair company, and tank and motorized rifle companies … [it] was organized into a reconnaissance group, a mine neutralization group, an obstacle removal group, a road repair and bridging group, a mine-laying group, and a reserve' (Russian General Staff 2002: 80). Dismounted infantry followed in its wake, scouring the hills along the axis of advance, all under the protective care of their *bronegruppa*.

The first major objective, Anava, fell on the first day. Edward Girardet was an eyewitness to the methodical progress of the Soviet/DRA advance as it pushed further on into the valley in the coming days: 'I had an awesome view of the field offensive. Strings of helicopter gunships clattered overhead to targets further up the Panjshair, while congested columns of armoured vehicles and trucks, headed by tanks equipped with huge rollers to predetonate mines, ground laboriously along the single dirt road that runs the length of the valley' (Girardet 2012: 82). As the main body advanced its artillery assets came within range of the air-assault units further up the valley, lending its support to the defence of their positions as they awaited the arrival of the main force.

For the paratroopers there was much hard work to do as they fought to secure the areas they had seized all along the valley. Moving up the steep mountainsides carrying back-breaking loads of ammunition and equipment was tiring and difficult work, especially in the growing heat of the day. Ponomarenko's unit had set out early in the morning relatively soon after landing, but they only began to approach their objective in the afternoon, gradually passing more and more detritus, including discarded arms and ammunition of fleeing Mujahideen; an indication of how discomfited

A Soviet paratrooper trains Afghan soldiers in close combat at Kabul Airport, 30 April 1988, as Soviet Army troops stop in Kabul prior to their withdrawal from Afghanistan. Though nominally ten divisions strong at the outset of the war, the Afghan Army all but disintegrated in the unrest prior to the invasion and the early stages of fighting, with desertions (sometimes of battalions or entire brigades) leaving little more than 25,000 men under arms in 1980. Pay and conditions for the enlisted men were poor, and though they were reasonably armed and equipped with Soviet weaponry, training was negligible. Conscription – in the form of twice-yearly sweeps by press gangs made up of Soviet soldiers in concert with KHAD operatives – helped to keep fresh blood coming in, but desertions continued and Afghan units were perennially under strength: 'The rule of thumb was that if the desertion rate was no more than about 30 per cent a year you were all right. If it went much above that you were in trouble, sixty per cent was bad news' (Braithwaite 2011: 137). (DOUGLAS E. CURRAN/AFP/Getty Images)

Contesting the Panjshir

Soviet view: In mid-May 1982 the Soviets launched what would turn out to be one of the largest operations of the entire war, attacking into the Panjshir with a strong motorized force, while thousands of airborne troops were air-landed along the length of the valley to deliver multiple killing blows at once. It is a warm morning, clear and bright. The artillery has spent some time pounding the rebel positions on the mountainside, followed by sortie after sortie by helicopter gunships, and now it is the turn of the airborne soldiers to make their mark. For the paratroopers of the VDV it has been a hard day's work so far, struggling under the weight of body armour and packs stuffed with spare ammunition and extra hand grenades; many of the men are also burdened with a pair of MON-100 anti-personnel mines slung around their necks, adding another 10kg to their load. As the land moves away from the base of the valley it quickly becomes rocky and increasingly steep, with lots of rocks and loose scree to make footing treacherous. As the paratroopers scramble up the unforgiving terrain towards a ridge they are fired upon with uncomfortable accuracy. One man has already been killed, his body slumped on the rough ground. The choice is to fall back to the safety of their jumping-off point or to forge ahead, so, cursing and sweating through their uniforms, the paratroopers return fire but do not go to ground, instead pushing onwards towards their enemy.

Afghan view: After the success of his assault on Bagram, Ahmad Shah Massoud was expecting a Soviet attack on his valley stronghold, but he was wrong-footed by the size and reach of that response, covering as it did almost the whole length of the Panjshir, not just the south-western end that he had fortified. Throughout the valley disparate groups of Mujahideen fight against the battalions of paratroopers that seem to have landed everywhere in their helicopters. In this instance around half a dozen Mujahideen fighters are part of a local group that has been surprised by the arrival of a strong force of *desantniki* who are intent on clearing them from the valley and all the surrounding hills. The Afghans are holed-up behind rocky outcrops on the mountain's ridge, making the most of their natural defences as well as the height of their position. They are dressed in a variety of clothes in various states of shabbiness; most are armed with older weapons, such as the .303in SMLE Mk III or even Magazine Lee-Enfield bolt-action rifles from before the beginning of the century, but some have Kalashnikovs of various types and one sports an RPG-7, which he is in the process of reloading. They can see the heavily burdened Soviet paratroopers struggling up the rocky slopes below them, and are trying to wound or kill as many of them as possible before they have to abandon their position; several of the riflemen are excellent shots and are taking care to mark their targets well before firing.

Soldiers from the 56th Separate Guards Airborne Assault Brigade based in Kunduz on patrol in Wardak province, June 1987. Note the variety and style of uniforms worn (for example, the running shoes worn by the soldier in the centre of the picture), reflecting the ad hoc and highly personalized nature of how troops dressed (and equipped) themselves before going into the field. Most of the soldiers are armed with the AKS-74 assault rifle, the folding-stock variant of the AK-74 assault rifle; the man to the left has two magazines taped together for faster reloading, and also carries an RPO *Shmel* ('Bumblebee'), a 93mm one-shot rocket launcher weighing 11kg that was often called a flamethrower by the troops that used it (*Reaktivnyy Pekhotnyy Ognemet*, 'Reactive Infantry Flamethrower') due to its warheads of thermobaric explosives, incendiary explosives or smoke. Also note the three 1.5-litre plastic water bottles carried by the same soldier. (E.Kuvakin, Vizu/ CC BY-SA 3.0)

the *dukhi* had been by the surprise assault. Ponomarenko remembered the experience:

> The heavy knapsack, the steep ascents, nervous tension, which turned into numbing indifference toward everyone and everything, and the heat did their job. The soldiers walking in front disappeared behind a projecting rock. I didn't understand what was going on when sharp rock splinters started flying on my right side. I understood only when someone fired a long [burst] at the embankment rising above us. No matter how much I watched the rock field, I didn't see from where they were shooting or who was shooting at us. At some point I thought I saw some movement up above me. I emptied a whole ammunition clip at the rock embankment. (Quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 37)

Ponomarenko's battalion moved on, coming to a settlement that looked 'as though the village was glued to the mountain wall' (quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 37–38). One part of the battalion continued into the mountains, while the other went through the village only to find it quite deserted. Such encounters, with an enemy that seemed invisible or who melted away before he could be brought to heel, were common enough in the Panjshir where the Mujahideen generally avoided pitched battles unless on highly favourable terms. Nevertheless, the appearance of Soviet and DRA troops throughout the length of the valley made it difficult for the defenders (as well as the local people) to know where to turn for safety. Abdullah Shariat was operating in the Hazara Valley (off the southern side of the Panjshir between Astana and Peshghor) and described how both civilians and fighters would take refuge in the area's many caves:

> These were originally natural caves but many were dug out and extended. Some were for a mass of people, others were deeper and made for ammunition. There was a locked door on the ammunition cave but not for the others. During the fighting everyone was mobile and kept small bags ready to move should they need

> to. The wounded were also kept in the caves with very little medical help. If they died they were buried quickly in their clothes. (Davies & Shariat 2004: 171)

Girardet saw that sometimes, however, there was nowhere left to run: 'Although much of the bombing was ineffective (many bombs never exploded), it had become so heavy in areas that the guerrillas were forced to engage the enemy in fierce hand-to-hand combat' (Girardet 2012: 83). Ponomarenko's unit found itself working up towards an enemy-held ridge at the far end of a stone-covered field when it came under telling fire:

> Our trench mortar shot at the enemy's firing points. We advanced from rock to rock, crag to crag, higher and higher, covering each other with our assault rifles … not everyone succeeded in crossing the field of stones. We had to leave the dead and four wounded behind in the field. The guerrillas began to shoot the wounded. There was nothing to obstruct the shooting. Even today I remember and hear their cries. (Quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 40)

The intensity of the fire precluded any attempt at rescue, so the paratroopers were forced to stay where they were and rage in impotence as their wounded were all killed. The Mujahideen did not let up, soaking Ponomarenko's position with fire that killed a lieutenant and a sergeant that were close by, sending jagged splinters of rock flying everywhere. Another attempt to rush across the field of stones was beaten back with casualties, and, after evacuating the wounded by helicopter, Ponomarenko and the *desantniki* tried once more:

> We couldn't advance any farther than the edge of the field. A cloud thrown up by the explosion of a shell rose in front of me. A small splinter hit my left hand. In the tumult of the battle I didn't even notice what had happened … we could advance as far as the upper plateau. From behind a rock a guerrilla jumped out in front of me. I shot at him and he was killed. I don't even remember his face … All together, it seemed as though our last attack had gone on for an eternity, although only five minutes could have passed since the beginning of the attack. (Quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 40–41)

Forced back once again, the latest attack had cost Ponomarenko's unit one man killed and four injured, one seriously in the stomach. Struggling under the burden of their dead and wounded the small group of paratroopers made it to the relative safety of the mountain's lower slopes where they used flares to signal the helicopters, eventually evacuating their casualties before they returned to the fight.

By 21 May the ground columns had joined up with the paratroopers who had taken the areas around Mata and Pasi-Sheun-Mardan, with the succeeding days seeing the effective pacification of the whole valley. From 25 May the last phase of the Panjshir operation commenced, a withdrawal of Soviet forces, handing over terrain-dominating strongpoints and two garrisons to the DRA, theoretically enabling the Afghan Army to dominate the valley and keep the insurgents from returning. By 28 May all the Soviet assault forces were clear of the Panjshir, which was soon flooded with returning Mujahideen who rapidly undermined the DRA outposts through negotiation, threat and direct

FAR LEFT
Afghan war veteran Sergei Shalnov, wounded by a landmine, is treated at the Kiev military district hospital, October 1988. Medical treatment for wounded Soviet soldiers was basic in the extreme, as recalled by one of the nurses: 'We lost so many because we didn't have the right drugs, the wounded were often brought in too late because the field medics were badly trained soldiers who could just about put bandages on; the surgeon was often drunk' (quoted in Alexievich 1992: 23–24). (Sovfoto/UIG via Getty Images)

LEFT
A portrait of Ahmad Shah Massoud (1953–2001), the most important military leader of the Jamiat-i-Islami Mujahideen faction, shown here communicating with his commanders via field phone as they approached the capital during the last days of the DRA's Communist regime in April 1992. Major-General Norat Grigoryevich Ter-Grigoryants, who served as the 40th Army chief of staff during 1982–83, called Massoud 'a very worthy opponent and a highly competent organiser of military operations. His opportunities for securing weapons and ammunition were extremely limited, and his equipment was distinctly inferior to that of the Soviet and government forces. But he was nevertheless able to organise the defence of the Pandsher in a way which made it very difficult for us to break through and to take control of the valley' (quoted in Braithwaite 2011: 184). (Photo by Robert Nickelsberg/ The LIFE Images Collection/ Getty Images)

attack. In almost no time at all, the situation had reverted to more or less the same it had been at the campaign's outset.

The Mujahideen proved to be poor conventional soldiers but excellent fighters, making the most of their home ground and the disadvantages under which their enemy laboured. Igor Ponomarenko noted how his unit, after attacking and chasing a band of Mujahideen fighters in another engagement, lost them in the high ground: 'We had to recognise their superiority once again. The guerrillas knew the territory wonderfully, every fold of the mountains, path, cave, and hole where they could hide and wait for the dangerous situation to pass. They escaped right from under our noses' (quoted in Heinämaa *et al.* 1994: 39). The air-landed troops, particularly the paratroopers who had been responsible for the deepest penetrations of the valley, performed well and earned the respect of their adversaries. Edward Girardet noted how the *desantniki* were a cut above their motorized brethren: 'Unlike ordinary Soviet combat troops, these elite forces were far better trained and had the ability to move quickly. According to Massoud, their courage even won the admiration of the mujahideen, but, he said, they had never faced real war conditions. "As soon as they came down and took losses, they evacuated"' (Girardet 2012: 83).

The general failings of Panjshir V were too clear to ignore, leading OKSVA to launch another attempt in August, Panjshir VI, that ground to a disappointing halt a month later, having also achieved much less than was hoped. Exhausted by the Sisyphean nature of their task and with other fish to fry, the Soviets negotiated a truce with Ahmad Shah Massoud – the first of the war – for a period of six months that eventually lasted until April 1984. The Soviets, spearheaded by the *desantniki*, would return to the Panjshir again and again in the coming years of the war, but they never had sufficient strength to take as well as hold the valley. OKSVA's Panjshir offensives were always storms that, no matter the damage they did when they broke, would soon pass. Massoud and his men knew full well that all they had to do was take shelter and await the sun.

Hill 3234

7–8 January 1988

BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

The closing weeks of 1987 would see one of the largest airborne efforts of the occupation, and the last significant operation of OKSVA. The war had dragged on for nearly a decade with no prospect of victory over the rebellion. By 1985 the Soviet Union was looking to disentangle itself from its Afghan misadventure, and the gradual shift towards withdrawal had been formalized in a plan that saw Soviet combat units leaving in earnest from January 1987, the expectation being for them all to be gone from the country by February 1989. Such an escape may have solved many of the Soviet Union's problems,

Smuggling anti-tank mines at night into Paktia province, 1984. For the Mujahideen, deliveries of fresh supplies and weapons were intermittent and usually on a small scale, as noted by Olivier Roy who observed the rebels' logistical processes first-hand during the war: 'For example, the Panjshir front receives only six convoys per year. The Panjshir convoys are amongst the largest run by the resistance: from fifty to a hundred horses, carrying a maximum of ten tons on each journey. An ordinary resistance group of twenty men may spend six months at Peshawar, which is the time required to get together their consignment of a dozen AK-47s, an RPG with a dozen rounds and some Lee-Enfield rifles. To bring a DshK back is a major task reserved for highly regarded local commanders' (Roy 1986: 186). (Erwinlux)

A reconnaissance unit from the 56th Separate Guards Airborne Assault Brigade with a string of freshly captured prisoners, Wardak province, June 1987. The airborne forces adapted more quickly (and much more effectively) to the demands of fighting a guerrilla war over highly variable, usually inhospitable terrain than did their compatriots in the 40th Army's motor-rifle divisions. 'In the early days of the war, Soviet air assault missions were rather timid and unimaginative. Later, the Soviets became more confident with the air assault concept and struck deeper and more aggressively. Ambush forces were delivered by helicopter, and raiding forces struck deep at Mujahideen supply bases and staging areas and even conducted raids against Mujahideen redoubts … The Soviets usually sent a ground element to link up with the air assault element if the air assault element had to remain in the area for any length of time. Soviet air assaults relied on helicopter gunships and SU-25 close air support aircraft for fire support, but frequently brought their artillery with them by helicopter' (Jalali & Grau 2001: 239). (E. Kuvakin, Vizu/ CC BY-SA 3.0)

but it promised little for the DRA's communist government or for President Mohammad Najibullah, the man who now ran it. OKSVA had been at pains to improve training for the Afghan Army in the hope that it would be able, at long last, to stand up on its own to the enemies who threatened the regime, and while there had been definite successes in this area, Najibullah wanted more. The Afghan president was keen to establish his rule as militarily strong and successful, and a good way of achieving such a goal would be a strategic victory over the guerrillas.

The road that ran from Kabul down to Gardez and then through to Khost in Paktia province had been severed by the Mujahideen in 1981, from which time on the city was more or less constantly under siege and needed to by resupplied by air; an expensive and intensive process. The increasing availability of SAMs within rebel ranks made even this option more treacherous in the latter years of the war; a military undertaking to break the enemy's stranglehold on access to the city would make strategic sense but would also bear much political fruit (Schofield 1993: 116–17). The rebels understood the logic, too: 'General [Gulzarak] Zadran [an Afghan Army defector who was a veteran of several campaigns in Paktia] concluded that the Soviets meant to show their military might to the world by doing the impossible, so that they could then end the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and withdraw with a solid victory to their credit' (Jalali & Grau 2001: 167).

Code-named *Magistral* ('Highway'), the aim of the mission was to reopen the Gardez–Khost road. The first stage of the operation would be to take the Satukandav Pass which Lieutenant A.N. Shishkov (an assistant to the Chief of the Operations Section in an airborne division) knew was seen by the Western press as 'the unassailable bastion on which the Russians will break their teeth' (quoted in Grau 2001: 60). Assuming the pass could be seized, the next objective was to clear the mountains of guerrillas and provide a secure cordon around the roadway. Once that was done, the main obstructions to the free flow of traffic between Gardez and Khost would be gone.

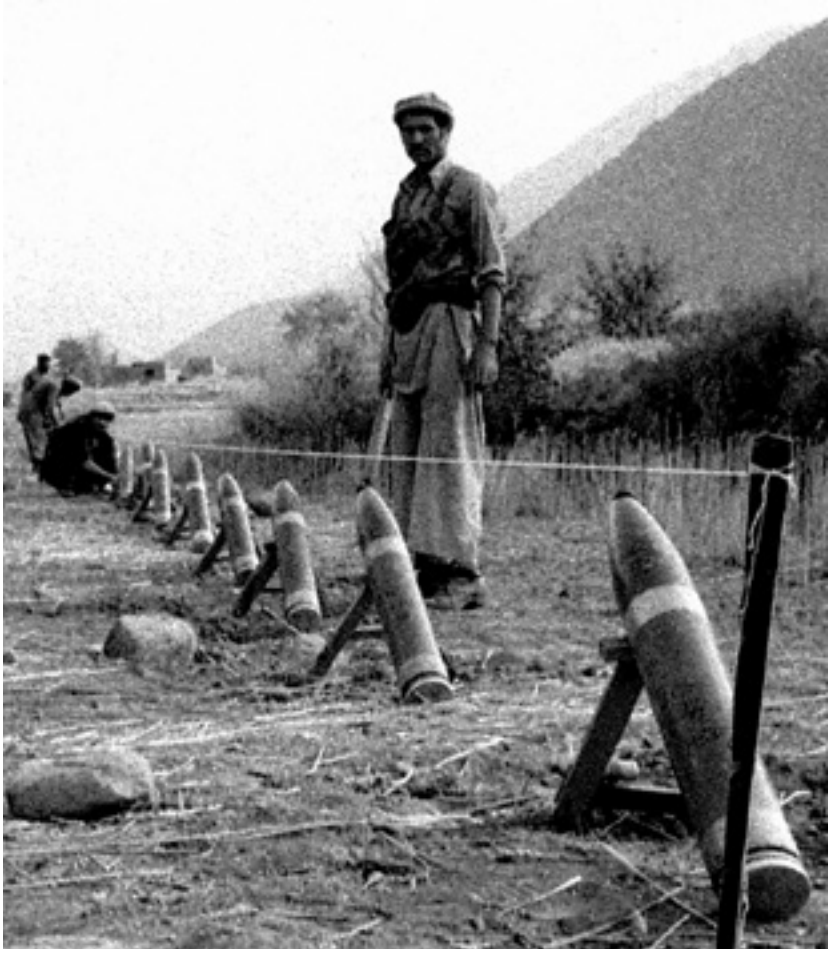
Members of a Spetsnaz team prepare for a mission, 1989. Spetsnaz veteran Timothy Gusinov noted that the best way to interdict Mujahideen supply columns was by helicopter assault or the setting of ambushes: 'The general rule for intercepting and destroying weapons and ammunition convoys is that the closer to the enemy's base or main camp the convoy is intercepted, the higher the chances the convoy will be in one piece and its security will not be on full alert. After a large convoy arrives at a distribution base or area, representatives of different field commanders and tribes meet it and divide it into smaller groups, which are much harder to detect. When a long line of camels loaded with weapons and ammunition is attacked, the most depressing thing is the maddening shriek of wounded animals. The wounded from the convoy security detachment scream too, but they are the enemy; the animals are victims. The most unpleasant thing is when a camel loaded with mines or TNT explodes into bloody pieces, killing everyone nearby' (Gusinov 2002: 105). Despite the success of such tactics, Lieutenant Colonel Vadim Aleksievich Kokorin (Intelligence chief of staff for the 40th Army during 1985–87) observed that barely 15–20 per cent of Mujahideen caravans were intercepted, far too small a proportion to have a strategic impact on the outcome of the war (Braithwaite 2011: 134). (Mikhail Evstafiev/CC BY-SA 2.5)

Lieutenant-General Boris Vsevolodovich Gromov was to lead the offensive, with the DRA forces commanded by Major-General Shahnawaz Tanai. The main ground formations assigned to the operation were the 108th and 201st Motor-Rifle divisions (elements of each division were temporarily amalgamated to operate as a composite division under the 201st's headquarters), the 103rd Guards Airborne Division, the 56th Separate Guards Airborne Assault Brigade, the 345th Separate Guards Parachute Regiment (345 SGPR) and the 191st Separate Motor-Rifle Regiment. The DRA component consisted of the 8th, 11th, 12th, 14th and 25th divisions, the 15th Tank Brigade and various special-forces elements including the 37th Commando Brigade (Grau 2001: 61). Enemy strength was estimated at around 15,000:

> The rebels in this area were well-organised, and most were under the command of Jalladin Haqqani, a respected *mujaheddin* leader who was more successful than most at suppressing divisive rivalries among his followers. Key points on the road from Gardez to Khost, especially the vital Sato Kandao Pass, had been strongly reinforced, with a series of bases and weapons emplacements. Jalladin's men were well-equipped, with large-calibre machine guns and 'Blowpipe' and 'Stinger' missiles. (Schofield 1993: 117)

Magistral began on 19 November, grinding along slowly at first, led by Afghan contingents who cleared the lowlands and swept the road up to the Satukandav Pass for mines; the pass itself fell to a well-staged airborne insertion that wrong-footed the defenders, forcing them to beat a hasty retreat to avoid encirclement. With the pass in Soviet/DRA hands, the rest of December was given over to clearing the mountains of rebel camps and defensive positions, and after those objectives had been achieved to securing those selfsame mountains against any bands of Mujahideen who might wish to return and threaten the roadway. It was in this role that 345 SGPR was employed, the regiment's battalions occupying the heights to the south-west of the road near Sarani. They would be spread thinly, dotted in small fastnesses over a wide range of mountain tops, too wide to allow for mutual support or quick help in the event of something going wrong.

Originally a part of the 105th Guards Airborne Division (until that unit's dissolution in 1979, whereupon it was designated as a 'separate' regiment), 345 SGPR was a veteran unit that had been in Afghanistan since the very start of the war. Stationed at Fergana then Bagram, the regiment had accumulated extensive operational experience, taking part in numerous raids and offensives in most of the country's severe trouble-spots, including the Panjshir Valley. The 39 paratroopers of the 9th Company included men from nine different regions of the Soviet Union, and despite their youth (most were not yet 20) and the fact that they were conscripts, Lester Grau observed that 'they were all tough paratroopers and graduates of five months of intense combat and mountain training at the Kostroma mountain training center, located in the Fergana Valley of the Uzbek ASSR' (Grau 2011: 224–25). They also had the benefit of one of OKSVA's best regimental commanders in the shape of Lieutenant Colonel Valery Aleksandrovich Vostrotin. At the time of *Magistral* Vostrotin was an energetic and talented 36-year-old veteran of numerous engagements dating from the very first hours of the war; he had commanded the same 9th Company in December 1979 as a senior lieutenant when it took part in the assault on the Taj Bek Palace that heralded the Soviet takeover of Afghanistan.



Mujahideen prepare a row of rockets for an attack on Barikot, Kunar, August 1985. The rockets are most likely 140mm M-14s, normally fired from a BM-14 MLRS vehicle or an RPU-14 towed 16-round launcher. The range of such ordnance is between 3.8km and 9.8km, each rocket delivering a warhead containing 3.68kg of high explosive; though unguided, when used en masse such an attack was often highly effective, with the random nature of the rocket strikes adding to the panic and stress of those on the receiving end. A civilian employee remembered 'When a bombardment starts and those RS rockets whistle over your head you just shake with fear. Two young soldiers went on patrol with a dog, but the dog came back without them … When the bombardment starts we run to the shelters while the Afghan kids dance on the roofs for joy. As I say, everyone's damaged. Those kids even dance and sing when they see our casualties being carried out.' (quoted in Alexievich 1992: 114). (Erwinlux)

Hill 3234, 7–8 January 1988

MAP KEY

1 1530hrs, 7 January: Senior Lieutenant Viktor Gagarin's 1st Platoon is rocketed and his position charged from the south. He holds out, thanks in part to the support he receives from Junior Sergeant Vyacheslav Alexandrov's NSV heavy machine gun.

2 1610hrs, 7 January: Another attack follows, this time mostly from the north. Radio operator Corporal Andrei Fedotov is killed, as is Junior Sergeant Alexandrov, his NSV position destroyed by multiple RPG strikes.

3 1735hrs, 7 January: Senior Lieutenant Sergei Rozhkov's 2nd Platoon is attacked from three sides, and the company's reserve unit, the scout platoon commanded by Senior Lieutenant Alexei Smirnov, also comes under assault.

4 1910hrs, 7 January: The heaviest attack of the day is launched, a general attempt to overwhelm the entire company, at some points coming to within 10–15m of the paratroopers' positions. The attacks continue, 12 in total, until 0300hrs the following day.

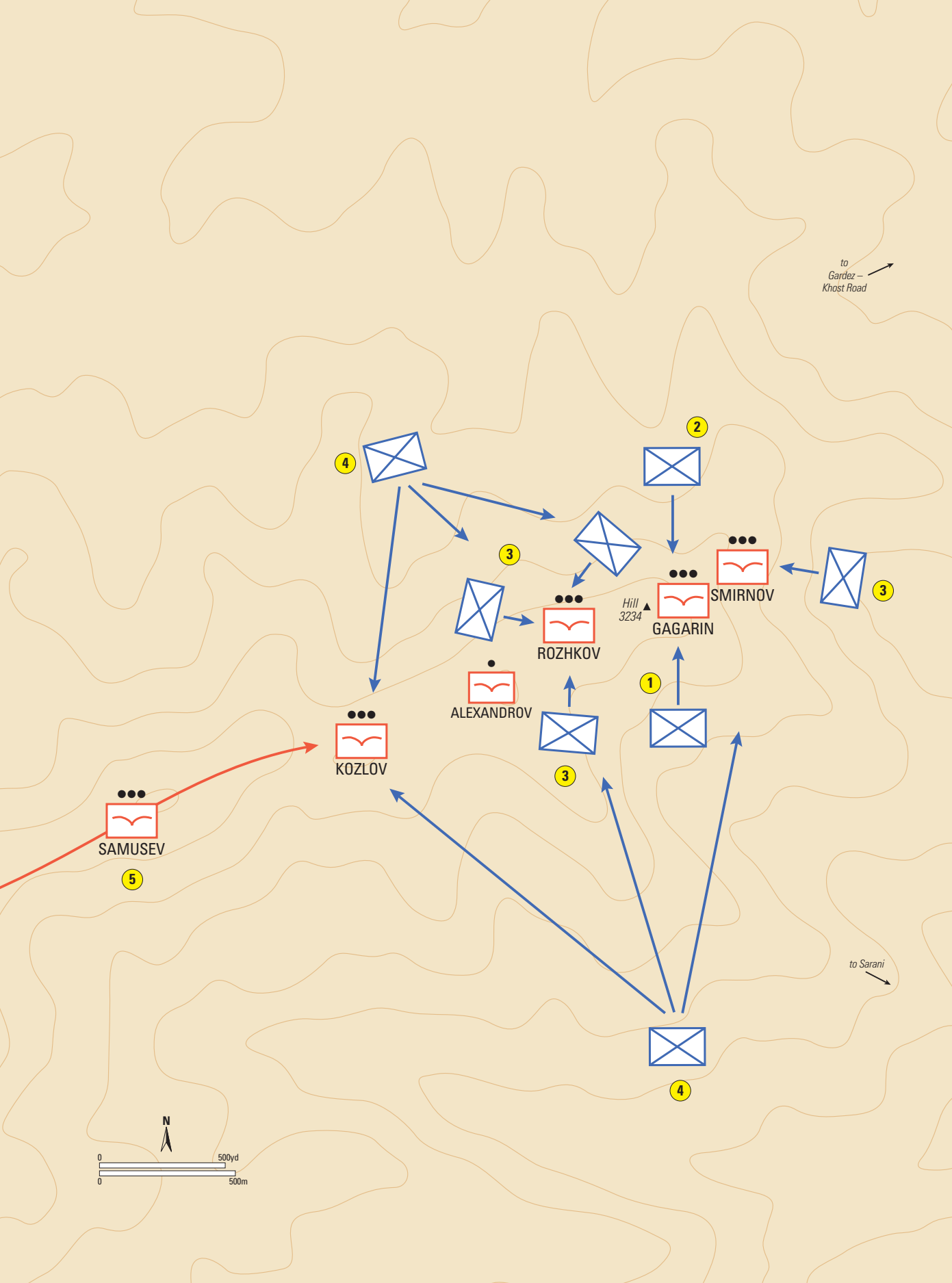
5 0100hrs, 8 January: 345 SGPR's deputy political officer, Nikolai Samusev, leads an ad hoc relief column to Hill 3234. Three hours later another scratch force departs from the regimental headquarters, arriving with vital supplies of ammunition. The Mujahideen do not renew their assault.

Battlefield environment

Hill 3234 overlooked the Gardez–Khost road in Paktia province in eastern Afghanistan. The road, an ancient trading route that was mostly unmetalled, routed south-east from Gardez for around 30km, rising 610m from the Gardez river valley, where it climbed through the Satukandav Pass 'which is [according to Lieutenant A.N. Shishkov], practically speaking, the only way through the mountains between Gardez and Khost' (quoted in Grau 2001: 60). From the pass the road ran south through steep-sided valleys for around 10km, thereafter winding south-eastwards for another 25km until it cleared the peaks and ran down 1,200m into the lowlands and eventually Khost.

To have any chance of using the road safely the seizure of the Satukandav Pass was the essential first step, followed by control of the dominating heights that overlooked the course of the road as it traversed the mountains. Due to the area's arid nature the vegetation tended to be sparse and scrubby; the whole area was also peppered with cave complexes from which guerrilla bands could operate and within which they stockpiled considerable reserves of supplies and ammunition. The task was made more difficult by the harsh winter conditions that were bound to be a complicating factor for troops operating in extremely rough terrain and at very high elevations.

A view from the upper slopes of Hill 3234 (looking in a westerly direction) in Paktia province, eastern Afghanistan, 1988. Even for well-trained and extremely fit troops such as those of the VDV, manoeuvring into position in such terrain was hard, exhausting work, and a combination of the forbidding landscape as well as the extreme height – near or sometimes above the limits of Soviet helicopters – made insertion, extraction and resupply by air anything but a foregone conclusion. (S.V. Rozhkov/CC BY-SA 3.0)


to
Gardez –
Khost Road
4
2
3
3
SMIRNOV
Hill
3234
GAGARIN
ROZHKOV
ALEXANDROV
1
KOZLOV
3
SAMUSEV
5
to Sarani
4
N
0
500yd
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OPPOSITE
A guerrilla aims a FIM-92 Stinger MANPADS surface-to-air missile at passing aircraft near a remote rebel base in the Safed Koh mountains, 10 February 1988. The Stinger only really started to make an impact in the latter stages of the war, but it was a superior weapon to the *Strela* variants and Blowpipe missiles the Mujahideen had been using up to that point, and it took its toll on Soviet air assets, especially helicopters: 'Daoud Rams, a former MiG-21 pilot with the Afghan air force, stated that "The Blowpipe missile didn't present as serious a problem to fighter aircraft as Stinger. Both Stinger and Blowpipe were real problems for helicopters, but we were more concerned with Stinger … Before Stinger, we were free to do almost anything we wanted. After Stinger was introduced, we changed all our tactics, altitudes and speed – everything. We did not like to fly down low, and when we had to, we flew very fast, and even at high altitudes, we flew as fast as we could ... We were no longer able to operate at will whenever and wherever we wanted to' (quoted in Westermann 1999: 15–16). (Robert Nickelsberg/ Getty Images)

INTO COMBAT

On 27 December 1987 Hill 3234 was taken by 345 SGPR's reconnaissance company, the men of the regiment's understrength 9th Company taking up residence on a nearby hillside. The next few days saw engineers sweeping the road for mines and making the area safe for traffic, and on 29 December the first convoy to pass through the mountains since 1981 rolled along the road to Khost, arriving the next day. Even at such a point of Soviet success, many of the rebels who had fled across the Pakistani border started to return and establish themselves once more in the mountains overlooking the road. Lieutenant Colonel Vostrotin's 345 SGPR was responsible for the heart of the mountainous region that overlooked the road near Sarani, a strategically important role that was hard to fulfil in such hostile terrain with so few men. Vostrotin placed his regimental headquarters in the centre of the zone, with his three battalions spread out in a semi-circle in range of artillery support, the 3rd Battalion's companies distributed around the peaks to the south-east. The basic principle was one of securing the heights because 'what had worked well so far was to gain control of high ground and position air and artillery controllers with radios on that high ground. The optimum way to engage the Mujahideen was with long-range fires for which they had few counters' (Grau 2011: 224).

The 9th Company's deputy commander, Senior Lieutenant Sergei Tkachyov, was in charge of the unit when it relieved the reconnaissance company and moved into its new positions around Hill 3234 on the evening of 31 December. The defence was to be centred on a 12.7mm NSV *Utes* ('Rock') heavy machine gun operated by a small section under the command of Junior Sergeant Vyacheslav Alexandrov that overlooked the whole area. The left flank of the position was taken by Sergeant Major Vasili Kozlov's 3rd Platoon; 300m to the north-east (and 200m lower down) was Senior Lieutenant Sergei Rozhkov's 2nd Platoon, covering both sides of the ridge. To Rozhkov's right flank was Senior Lieutenant Viktor Gagarin's 1st Platoon, also deployed to cover both sides of the hill, with Senior Lieutenant Alexei Smirnov's reconnaissance platoon of 15 *razvedchiki* (scouts) in the same area but detailed to act as the company's reserve. In addition to the NSV the defenders had a pair of 7.62mm PKM light machine guns, an AGS-17 *Plamya* ('Flame') grenade launcher, several hand-held rocket launchers (most likely one-shot RPG-18s or -22s), as well as the usual panoply of small arms. The company also enjoyed the services of Senior Lieutenant Ivan Babenko, who had been attached (along with his radioman Corporal Andrei Fedotov) to the small force as its artillery fire coordinating officer. Babenko set up his observation post near Kozlov's 3rd Platoon at the highest vantage point on Hill 3234.

The platoons were situated on the mountain's upper slopes below the crest line, and quickly turned to making their new home defensible. Most approaches were heavily mined, with only one avenue of reinforcement or retreat left open. The ground was frozen hard, so instead of digging trenches the men built up a series of drystone walls called *kladki* set two rows deep, the better to absorb the impact of enemy fire. The nature of the terrain meant that the paratroopers had limited fields of fire, a common problem in mountain warfare noted by Lester Grau: 'Usually, occupying the crest does not permit

the defenders to conduct effective longer-range fires because the mountain sides have large spaces of dead zone that cannot be observed from the crest. The 9th Company had this problem and their enemy was able to approach fairly close to their positions before they could be engaged' (Grau 2011: 230). The Gardez–Khost road had finally been reopened on New Year's Eve, but that success was dependent on the paratroopers retaining control of the surrounding heights.

The weather over New Year had been grim, only clearing on 4 January. The paratroopers had got used to being shelled daily with mortars and rockets, but on 7 January their ad hoc *kladki* emplacements had been rocked by strong artillery attacks that were more than mere harassing fire: 'During one 20-minute period, some 300 mortar and rocket rounds fell on the Soviet positions. Some recoilless rifles may also have fired' (Grau 2011: 227). At 1530hrs a concerted rocket attack was launched from three sides against Senior Lieutenant Gagarin's 1st Platoon, followed by an infantry assault from the south that got to within 200m. Junior Sergeant Alexandrov was the first to notice the advance of the guerrillas on Gagarin's position, engaging them with his NSV heavy machine gun, allowing the 1st Platoon to get into a better position to deal with the threat. Gagarin's swift call for artillery support (in the shape of shattering bombardments by BM-21 *Grad* multiple-rocket launchers) suppressed most of the rebel rocket and recoilless rifle fire, but the respite was to be brief.

At 1610hrs under cover of an intense barrage the rebel attack resumed from two directions, with the main thrust coming from the north. It was apparent to the defenders, veterans of many engagements against the Mujahideen over the years, that this was something different from their enemy's usually informal guerrilla tactics. The attack seemed to be coordinated by walkie-talkie

and had the hallmarks of conventionally trained troops, as noted by Franz Klintsevich, one of 345 SGPR's intelligence officers: 'The enemy was able to begin advancing on our men very quickly, and they did this professionally, one group moving forward being covered by the others. Our people could tell that proper commands were being given' (quoted in Schofield 1993: 121). Some of the men were wearing what looked like black uniforms and turbans, with red, yellow and black stripes on their sleeves. There had been rumours that 'Black Storks' (supposedly an element from the Pakistani Special Services Group) had crossed the border to operate in support of the rebels battling for control of the area; that supposition coupled with the unusually disciplined way the rebel force was conducting itself gave rise to the idea that the attackers were either Pakistani special forces, or a special-forces-supported Mujahideen unit that had been trained and equipped by them.

The attack proved more effective than its predecessor. Franz Klintsevich, originally in charge of the regiment's *Spetsprop* (special propaganda) unit but who had found his calling as a highly effective intelligence officer, noted that 'The assault, when it came, was so fierce that three grenades hit one *klatka* (manned by three soldiers) at the same moment; those who were not wounded were dazed by the noise and the intensity of the fire' (quoted in Schofield 1993: 120–21). Having felt the bite of the 12.7mm NSV, the rebels made a concerted attempt to silence it. Positioned as it was at a high vantage point in the centre of the line, it was able to sweep the surrounding approaches, but such an exposed site made it vulnerable. Intense rocket attacks struck the *kladki* around the NSV from almost every side, some fired from so close a range that the RPG warheads didn't have time to arm before impact. Ordering his gun team to seek cover Alexandrov stayed with his heavy machine gun, firing ceaselessly for 15 minutes before he was cut down by shrapnel from the repeated RPG strikes. When his position was examined the following day the defensive double-walls of stone were nearly unrecognizable, shattered by dozens of explosions, while the gun itself was riddled with holes.

A little earlier in the same attack Corporal Fedotov had been the first of the defenders killed, his radio also knocked out by shrapnel, forcing Babenko to use the platoon and company radios to direct fire missions. Klintsevich described how Fedotov

> was wounded in one arm but continued to shoot with the other. Then one of his batteries went flat, but he managed to connect the wires of two batteries using his mouth, and maintain communications – we had heard stories of the same feat in 1942. Although he had been hit, the *klatka* protected him from further injury. But then a grenade exploded against a nearby tree. His last message crackled over the radio, 'Say goodbye to my home … and don't forget me, lads', just as his throat was slashed by fragments of the grenade. (Quoted in Schofield 1993: 123)

The guerrillas were close enough for their calls on the Soviets to surrender to be heard, but the paratroopers held firm behind their rock walls and the vigour of the rebel advance died away.

Around 10–15 Mujahideen were thought to have been killed in the second attack, with around 30 wounded. Nevertheless, after the briefest of respites another assault was launched at 1735hrs. It targeted the centre of the position

A BM-21 *Grad* ('Hail') multiple-rocket launcher at the Tula State Museum of Weapons. Along with the quad-barrelled ZSU-23-4 *Shilka* anti-aircraft gun, the BM-21 would prove to be one of the most potent direct-fire weapons used by the Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Like the *Shilka*, the BM-21 was never designed with such missions in mind, but both systems proved adaptable, providing significant hitting power where it was needed most. Lester Grau observed that 'direct fire was a common offensive mission for artillery attached to maneuver units. Armored, self-propelled artillery was preferred for direct-fire missions, but towed or unarmored artillery was also used in this role. The unarmored BM-21 multiple-rocket launcher was often used when other direct fire failed to dislodge the enemy. The truck-mounted BM-21s were usually moved into direct firing positions under the protection of an air strike and each fired their forty 122mm rockets immediately after the air strike ended. The surviving guerrillas in the impact area were normally unable or unwilling to return fire on the BM-21s as they pulled out of the firing position to reload' (Grau 1997: 4). (Anton Novoderezhkin/ TASS via Getty Images)

now that the NSV had been knocked out, converging on Senior Lieutenant Rozhkov's 2nd Platoon from three directions at once. The guerrillas were beaten back once again, but Babenko had needed to call in fire support from the regiment's artillery assets to stabilize the situation. Casualties were mounting and the stores of ammunition were starting to run low. Yet another attack, this time taking in the entire company's position, was launched at 1910hrs, forcing even more desperate measures from Babenko, who

> called artillery fire in on top of the 9th Company. It was a desperate act for a desperate situation. The paratroopers huddled behind their kladki while rockets and howitzer rounds smashed into the mountain, most of the rounds falling among the enemy. The enemy attack failed, but only just. At points, they had come within 10–15 meters of the defending paratroopers. At other points, the combatants were locked in hand-to-hand combat. The soldiers were down to a magazine or two of ammunition. There were no grenades left. (Grau 2011: 228)

There would be more attacks as the night wore on, some of them severe, but none broke through. Klintsevich thought that

> The enemy had prepared for this assault very thoroughly, and they were fighting like fanatics: it was the first time our troops had encountered such stubborn and professional resistance. This height commanded half the road, and was therefore of vital importance to both sides. The Pakistanis [*sic*] had assumed that with such numbers they would be able to take it in one swift assault. Having failed to do so, they used the cover of night to regroup. (Quoted in Schofield 1993: 121–22)

The darkness also helped hide the critical weakness of the paratroopers' situation, huddled behind battered defences with most men wounded, some severely, and all in increasingly desperate need of ammunition.

Senior Lieutenant Smirnov, commander of the *razvedchiki*, had radioed the battalion about the dwindling supplies. At 0100hrs on 8 January Nikolai

SHUMATE
2017

The 9th Company under attack, Hill 3234, 7 January 1988

There will be no respite for the small band of 39 Soviet paratroopers clinging to their hastily fortified positions around the sides of Hill 3234. It is 7 January 1988, Christmas Day in the Orthodox calendar, and the ice-cold winter day has slipped into dusk by the time the third major Mujahideen attack is launched at 1735hrs. The paratroopers' mountainside fastness is rocky and covered in snow made filthy by movement, rocket strikes and blood. Hastily built *kladki* (low walls made from piling up loose stone) have been put up by the Soviets, who have few other defensive options in rocky and frozen ground that will not yield to shovels. The air is filled with dust, shrapnel and splinters of stone thrown up by the intensity of Mujahideen fire. Senior Lieutenant Sergei Rozhkov's 2nd Platoon is scattered among the rocky enclave: a marksman lies bleeding having been hit by shrapnel, leaning on his Dragunov rifle for support, a PKM gunner dashes to a new firing position cradling his light machine gun, all while Rozhkov exhorts his half-dozen men to fight back with everything they have.

Samusev, deputy chief of 345 SGPR's political department, set out with a few men carrying spare rations, water and ammunition in a column of BTRs and BMPs, driving over the rough mountain tracks as far as they could until the way became impassable for vehicles. They dismounted and met up with Smirnov and his *razvedchiki*, who helped them unload the vehicles and joined them in the task of manhandling the supplies up to the 9th Company's position. Samusev recalled how the small relief force struggled up the hill, each one burdened by around 45kg of personal equipment, weaponry and ammunition: 'We only had to cover about three kilometres, but it was so steep, and we were so loaded down, that it took us two and a half hours' (quoted in Schofield 1993: 123). Their arrival may well have made the difference in the company's survival through the night.

Vostrotin knew that Samusev's efforts would not be enough should the attacks resume with anything like the same intensity when the next day dawned, so he dragooned every available man he could find to go and help. Franz Klintsevich was a member of the second relief column:

> There were two platoons of the reconnaissance company, a platoon from the communications company, soldiers from various supply and support platoons, cooks, bottle washers, you name them, we had rounded them all up. We all knew how desperately ammunition was needed, that one zinc box containing 1120 bullets for an assault rifle or 700 for a machine gun would only last ten minutes. (Quoted in Schofield 1993: 123)

Loaded up with as much as they could carry, the column followed in Samusev's footsteps, driving as far as they could before dismounting and labouring up the treacherous slopes on foot. After around 12 hours of incessant bombardment and ferocious assaults, the guerrilla attacks on Hill 3234 had abated somewhat as the night progressed, which made the relief column's approach possible, though hardly free of hazards:

> As we climbed we heard shouting, from time to time, from the 9th Company position. We knew that ammunition meant life for those guys. People cut their legs, tore their fingernails, blistered their feet and twisted their ankles on the

> mountains, but we kept going. One soldier, carrying a full load, fell about thirty meters down the mountainside. The commander of the communications platoon shouted 'are you alive?' several times. There was no answer until we heard scuffling and the soldier's voice swearing. But he managed to climb back up the rock face again. (Quoted in Schofield 1993: 123)

The scratch relief force arrived at the beleaguered position in the early morning of 8 January. Klintsevich was taken aback by the sight that greeted him:

> The situation we found when we reached the 9th Company was beyond description. 1500 mines and shells had been fired at these men. They had been so short of ammunition that during the last wave of the attack, the soldiers had only been able to fire single shots; they couldn't spare the ammunition to fire in bursts. By the time we arrived they each had about fifteen bullets left. If we hadn't arrived the company would have been eliminated, we knew the attack would start again at dawn. (Quoted in Schofield 1993: 123)

Work quickly turned to helping the wounded, a task that proved to be unexpectedly difficult: 'I called for helicopters to evacuate the dead and the wounded, but their commanders refused, saying that it was too dangerous to send them. So the two reconnaissance platoons and I had to carry the wounded to the battalion medical point, a couple of kilometers across the mountains' (quoted in Schofield 1993: 123). In the event one Mi-8MB helicopter crew, ignoring protocol, took it upon themselves to fly in to help, overcoming the fact that there was nowhere to land on the escarpment by hovering with the helicopter's front wheels gently resting on the rock face while the dead and wounded were lifted up and loaded aboard through the rear cargo doors. For acting without orders the pilot was dismissed from his post and sent home in disgrace despite the fact that Vostrotin had nominated him for the Hero of the Soviet Union (Zaloga 1995: 261).

ABOVE LEFT
An Mi-24 helicopter gunship dips into a valley and flies past a manned military post on 22 May 1988. There was an extensive network of outposts manned by Soviet and Afghan troops spread throughout the country. Remarkably, no outpost was ever overwhelmed by Mujahideen action. (Douglas E. Curran/AFP/Getty Images)

ABOVE RIGHT
Afghans in Peshawar showing off the canopy of a downed Soviet jet, together with the pilot's helmet, 1984. The Mujahideen vastly increased their numbers of anti-aircraft guns and began using increasing numbers of man-portable SAM systems, the overall effect of which was not just to destroy increasing numbers of Soviet helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft, but to influence their tactics: 'One member of the *mujahideen* succinctly described the behavior change among attacking pilots in the following words: "They don't like suffering casualties, so they drop their bombs and fly home as quickly as they can"' (Westermann 1999: 16). (Erwinlux)

The battle had been a close-run thing, victory turning on the successful reinforcement and resupply of the company's shell-shattered site. The Mujahideen forces, though vastly outnumbering the defenders, were attacking well-fortified positions up steep and difficult mountain slopes; positions, moreover, that were also protected by an accurate and constant rain of shellfire. The strength and resources of the Soviet artillery had played a vital role in the defence of Hill 3234, with three batteries of 122mm D-30 howitzers, three batteries of 152mm 2S3 *Akatsiya* ('Acacia') self-propelled guns, as well as multiple-launch rocket systems, all drawn into the battle.

On the thorny and unresolved question of Pakistani participation in the operation, Lester Grau comments:

> The paratroopers believe that they were fighting special forces soldiers from Pakistan along with some supporting Mujahideen. They cite intercepted radio traffic and an airlift of combatants from Pakistan on board helicopters. Some claim that the enemy were in black uniforms and were well-trained soldiers. They claim that during Christmas night and during the next day, they could hear helicopters carrying the wounded back to Pakistan. If so, this would be unique. Pakistan occasionally sent advisers into Afghanistan to accompany the Mujahideen, but committing a uniformed national military force on national helicopters into a foreign country is a very different proposition. (Grau 2011: 230–31)

For Pakistan to commit such a potentially disastrous provocation in a war that was all but over seems unlikely, but as yet there is no definitive proof to settle the matter.

The result of *Magistral* was, like so many other Soviet operations, a tactical success, if one didn't look too closely at the results. The fighting had dwindled away by the end of the second week, leaving the supply dumps in Soviet hands and the Gardez–Khost road open once again, allowing the Soviet troops to pull out, handing over their hard-won gains to DRA units. In an entirely predictable turn of events the regime's soldiers crumbled almost immediately in the face of resurgent guerrilla activity; the commentary of the Mujahideen commanders who had fought in the battle was prosaic and to the point: 'The Soviets/DRA could only keep the road open for 12 days. Then they withdrew. When the Soviet air assault abandoned the heights, they took their weapons, but left all the ammunition behind. The Mujahideen recaptured the road and neither the DRA nor the Soviets could reopen it' (Jalali & Grau 2001: 168–72).

An awards ceremony for the men of the 9th Company in recognition of their defence of Hill 3234. Two awards of Hero of the Soviet Union were made posthumously, to Junior Sergeant Vyacheslav Aleksandrovich Aleksandrov and Private Andrey Aleksandrovich Melnikov; the regiment's commander, Lieutenant Colonel Valery Aleksandrovich Vostrotin, was also made a Hero of the Soviet Union, while all the remaining paratroopers of the company were awarded the Order of the Red Banner and/or the Order of the Red Star (Grau 2011: 218). Casualties for the 9th Company were heavy; six men had been killed, with a further 28 wounded (nine severely), only five coming through unhurt. Rebel casualties were impossible to determine with any degree of accuracy as they took their dead and wounded with them, but they must have numbered over 100. It was impossible for some Soviet officers not to be bitter about the effort and blood expended on an operation that turned out to be so hollow, causing Franz Klintsevich to exclaim that 'This was the most stupid and unnecessary operation ever performed in Afghanistan … Our men paid with their blood for Najeebollah's vanity. There was no military advantage to "MAGISTRAL" at all' (quoted in Schofield 1993: 125). (pravdao9rote.ru/CC BY-SA 3.0)

Analysis

THE KUNAR VALLEY

The basis of the Soviet plan for the first stage of the Kunar offensive was certainly over-optimistic, especially considering the potential for serious problems if anything interfered with the smooth advance of the road-borne part of the force, the delay of which would certainly cause significant issues for the airborne contingent. The lack of reconnaissance on the road, as well as the absence of any vehicles to deal with obstructions, were dismal failings. The landscape was nothing like that which the Soviets had been trained for, and certainly some of the mistakes made in the planning as well as by the officers once they were on the ground can be explained by their failure fully to appreciate the demands of the environment in which they found themselves fighting. They also seriously underestimated the qualities of the Mujahideen and the traditional guerrilla tactics they employed, which, however old-fashioned they may have been, worked all too well against a modern mechanized force. Nevertheless, the exemplary bravery shown by individual members of the airborne battalions, resulting in two posthumous awards of the Hero of the Soviet Union, spoke to the sense that such units had of themselves as an elite, worthy of distinction.

At this early stage in the war motorized troops were still wedded to their armoured personnel carriers, wary of fighting independently of them (as well they might be, according to Soviet doctrine which discouraged the practice); *bronegruppa* tactics – developing a mobile armoured force of five to six vehicles that could act independently from or in support of their infantry components – would only develop later as the war went on.

> The Soviet generals attempted to substitute fire power for ground maneuver. The Soviets did not deploy enough infantry to Afghanistan … [they] needed to use infantry aggressively to engage the Mujahideen and prevent their withdrawal, but

A Soviet soldier in Kabul, 1989. For the DRA, losses came to over 26,000 men, while Soviet losses are difficult to estimate accurately. Grau and Jalali note that 'Official Soviet casualties total 14,453 dead: 9,511 killed in action; 2,386 died of wounds; and 2,556 lost from disease and accidents. Some 53,753 were wounded. An incredible 415,932 men were hospitalized for a serious disease during their tour of duty' (Grau & Jalali 2002). The airborne units, who conducted the vast majority of offensive operations throughout the war, were necessarily hit the hardest. (Photo by John Downing/Getty Images)

> Soviet political decisions, security duties and force structure prevented assigning sufficient, trained light infantry to conduct offensive mountain combat. Soviet gunners tried to pick up the slack and lost 433 artillery pieces and mortars fighting the Mujahideen. But fire without maneuver cannot be decisive. (Grau 1997: 6–7)

The mostly negative experiences of 1980 and 1981 did provoke change within OKSVA, which sent most of its air-defence and tank assets back to the Soviet Union, evolving from a lumbering, armour-heavy, motorized force into one that focused more on combined-arms battlegroups supported by a vastly increased fleet of helicopters (Urban 1988: 211). Such changes did not, however, fully get to grips with the systemic issues around training, tactical flexibility and leadership. As an elite formation the airborne forces were better able to adapt to such issues than their motorized brethren, but even they were dogged by the Army's structural problems such as inadequate logistics and poor facilities, as well as its cultural and institutional failings like the absence of a professional NCO cadre and the cancerous culture of *dedovshchina*.

PANJSHIR V

There had been a slow evolution of Soviet tactics; by 1982 air-assault forces were the defining element in most offensive operations, and a much greater emphasis was put on launching attacks from multiple axes using combined arms to force the Mujahideen from their positions while simultaneously cutting off their avenues of escape. This certainly led to individual successes, but such victories required detailed planning, very well-trained troops led by officers with initiative, and close cooperation with artillery, air support and the motorized formations that were the hammer to the air assault's anvil.

The Soviets' own verdict on their effectiveness in Panjshir V was none too positive:

> Combat showed that, as a rule, frontal attacks by Soviet and Afghan forces did not succeed. During the air strikes by fighter bombers and close air support aircraft and during the artillery strikes, the enemy would successfully withdraw his forces and weapons along communication trenches cut in the slopes to preserve their combat power. As the advancing force went over to the attack, the Mujahideen forces and weapons would return to their prepared positions and put up a stubborn resistance. However, not a single Soviet or Afghan commander decided to change his tactics during the operation. The Soviet/Afghan force slowly displaced the

Afghan guerrillas celebrate atop a captured BTR-60PB. The victory over the Soviet invaders had come at horrific cost, with estimates of 1–1.5 million civilian dead (Braithwaite 2011: 347), several million more wounded, with 2 million people internally displaced and a further 5 million fleeing the country as refugees, mostly to vast camps in bordering Pakistan. Without Soviet support (finally removed by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991) President Mohammad Najibullah's government was fatally weakened, with the war dragging on until Kabul fell in April 1992. Factional infighting among the victors almost immediately led to another civil war which, in one form or another, continues to this day. The erstwhile President Najibullah slipped away in the confusion of the capital's fall, hiding beneath the UN's wing until the ascendancy of the Taliban overtook him in September 1996, whereupon he met a traditionally grisly end. (Photo by Peter Jouvenal/Getty Images)

> enemy from his occupied positions, but did not inflict significant casualties on the Mujahideen. (Russian General Staff 2002: 81–82)

Such observations had been made time and again since the start of the war.

A phased withdrawal concluded the operation, the valley soon falling back into rebel hands, necessitating yet another major offensive (Panjshir VI in August–September 1982) that also yielded temporary tactical success which dissolved once again into retreat and failure, finally resulting in a truce with Massoud at the year's end. Soviet planning was always short-term, still lacked a full understanding of how to fight effectively in such demanding terrain, usually failed to appreciate the resilience and ingenuity of their opponents, and placed an undue level of expectation on the demonstrably poor Afghan Army. Such factors were heavily influenced by what OKSVA could achieve with its limited resources (just large enough to initiate a campaign like Panjshir V, but not to sustain it long-term or ensure that its tactical victories were anything but temporary), and were compounded by the overall muddiness of Soviet strategic thinking about the war.

Captain Leonid Khabarov of the 56th Separate Guards Airborne Assault Brigade noted the consistent short-sightedness of Soviet tactics:

> Why … did we leave the Pandsher so quickly? What was the point of the operation? … Throughout the whole of that war practically every operation ended in the same way. Military operations began, soldiers and officers died, Afghan soldiers died, the mujahedin and the peaceful population died, and when the operation was over our forces would leave, and everything would return to what it had been before. I still feel guilty and bitter about the Afghan government forces … whom we betrayed and sold down the river when we left Afghanistan, leaving them and their families to the mercy of the victors. (Quoted in Braithwaite 2011: 223)

HILL 3234

The decision to force open the Gardez–Khost road was reasonable, even at such a late stage of the war. The Soviet withdrawal was well under way by late 1987, but it was an ordered operation that required a functional and more or less stable state be left in its wake. Operation *Magistral* would prove to be a significant – if short-term – effort that succeeded in the teeth of stiff resistance in extremely difficult terrain that could not be taken without the employment of highly mobile and well-trained airborne assets.

The resistance by the men of the 9th Company in the face of nearly overwhelming enemy attacks was undoubtedly valiant, and their success was anything but a foregone conclusion. Lester Grau's summary of the practical elements involved in such a defensive endeavour is both comprehensive and accurate:

> Occupying the highest terrain may provide good observation, but limits fields of fire and fragments the defensive perimeter. Radio communications may be the final determinant for a defensive position. Crew-served weapons should be sited for long-range fields of fire and effective grazing fire. The commander needs to walk the position to determine dead space and plot grenade, mortar, and artillery fires to deal with it. All weapons require alternate firing positions. Aiming stakes, as well as physical traverse and overhead limits or transverse and elevation mechanisms are essential for crew-served weapons firing at night. Close air support is not available 24/7, nor can it be, but artillery can. Properly sited field fortifications, though tough to construct in the mountains, are the defending infantryman's best friend. (Grau 2011: 218)

In addition to such measures, the stubborn courage of the defenders in the face of repeated attacks by a determined and unusually well-trained foe must be acknowledged.

It is difficult to measure the exact extent of Pakistani influence or participation in the battle, but it seems clear from the testimony of the paratroopers that the Mujahideen were fighting in a more 'conventional' way than was usually the case, employing fire-and-movement tactics supported by light artillery in the form of mortars and 107mm rockets (as well as RPGs). Their lack of any heavier artillery to bombard either their objectives on Hill 3234 or to allow counter-battery fire to suppress the guns supporting the VDV defenders certainly weakened their attempts to fight in a more formal manner. In the end the usual pattern of the war – an intense Soviet incursion that fought the local guerrillas to a standstill, followed by the tactical withdrawal of that selfsame force from its hard-won positions allowing the Mujahideen to reoccupy them with little effort – was to play out along the Gardez–Khost road as well. With the Soviet draw-down in troops in full swing, it was inconceivable that there would be the resources or the will to keep the road open with assets from the 40th Army, so with their operation a tactical success the Soviets handed over their outposts defending the newly reopened road to the DRA, who promptly abandoned them within the week. By the end of January 1988, all was as it had been before.

Aftermath

The Soviet involvement in Afghanistan was never meant to be a long-term occupation, and certainly not a war of conquest. Robert Baumann notes that 'Soviet strategy was predicated from the beginning upon the resuscitation of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan's army. The Soviet military mission was to hammer the resistance until Red forces were no longer needed' (Baumann 1993: 135). Such a strategy explains the relatively parsimonious allocation of troops by the Soviet Union, effectively hamstringing OKSVA's chances of inflicting anything more than short-lived victories over the Mujahideen. Despite such failings, there was no fundamental reorientation of Soviet strategy, in the early years probably due to inertia among the sclerotic leadership in the Kremlin, and after Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 because the most obvious political gains lay not in an escalation of the war but in an escape from it. When it came, the Soviet withdrawal was well-planned and executed, starting in earnest from January 1987 and coming to a conclusion on 15 February 1989, with Lieutenant-General Gromov, the final commander of the 40th Army, being the last Soviet soldier to leave, walking across the 'Friendship Bridge' over the Amu Darya to Soviet Termez.

The Afghan government and army that the Soviets left behind them were strong enough to weather the various Mujahideen

For many Soviet soldiers the violence they encountered forced them to adapt, as recalled by airborne soldier Yuri Tinkov: 'In general, fear came at the stage of adaptation, or right at the beginning. At that stage emotions were very much on the surface … After the phase of acclimatization there followed an almost complete atrophy of emotions. You just lived like a machine' (quoted in Behrends 2015: 724). Such a response was hard to shake off, one Spetsnaz commander observing that 'It took me much longer to get used to a peaceful way of life than to get used to war. I had a feeling of being lonely and defenseless when I walked around in my hometown without a gun. I'd gotten used to carrying a gun' (quoted in Behrends 2015: 724). (Mikhail Evstafiev/CC BY-SA 3.0)

A DRA soldier sits atop a T-64 main battle tank perched above a valley on the approach to the Salang Pass in August 1989, a key point on the main supply artery along which Soviet convoys rolled southwards to Kabul. Attacks on the road network (anything from occasional rifle fire through to well-coordinated ambushes using volleys of rocket-propelled grenades from ranges as close as 25m), were regular and often deadly, with Afghan roadsides gradually gathering an impressive collection of numberless wrecks and burnt-out trucks. Over the course of the war the Soviets lost 147 tanks, 1,314 armoured personnel carriers, 510 engineering vehicles and 11,369 trucks, many in the ceaseless struggle to keep the supply lines open (Grau 2001: xix). (GEORGES GOBET/AFP/ Getty Images)

offensives, but not to stop them from happening in the first place. The Afghan state's ability to sustain itself without Soviet troops was due in large part to the fact that though OKSVA may have gone, Soviet support remained in the shape of advisers, a constant supply of goods and war *matériel*, and the facility to coordinate air strikes in support of DRA operations (Grau 2007: 258). Ironically enough, the Afghan government's death-knell was sounded in Moscow rather than Kabul, Lester Grau observing that 'The Soviet Union dissolved on 31 December 1991 – and most of the DRA's economic, political and military support disappeared with it' (Grau 2007: 260). The Mujahideen, factional and self-serving at the best of times, had found it difficult to sustain their operations after the unifying hatred the Soviets provided left with them. Nevertheless, the change in circumstances occasioned by the disappearance of the Soviet Union weakened the DRA to the point that major defections to the Mujahideen became a realistic choice for men such as General Abdul Rashid Dostum and the forces he commanded. Kabul would fall on 27 April 1992, though that would not signal the war's end so much as another stage in its evolution.

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was a far bloodier affair than had been anticipated, proving to be a charnel pit into which money, men and machines were thrown to no appreciable effect. For Afghanistan it was an unmitigated catastrophe, causing countless deaths of non-combatants, the wholesale displacement of vast numbers of people, the rapacious destruction of the agricultural economy, and the transformation of local rebel groups into well-developed militarized factions who, with the Soviets gone and the DRA destroyed, had every incentive to turn from the bones of their old enemies and tear at one another instead.

UNIT ORGANIZATIONS

Soviet airborne forces

A Soviet airborne division (6,554 all ranks) comprised an HQ (180 men; six 9K32 *Strela-2/3*; six RPG-16), three parachute (*parashyutno-desantnyy*) regiments, an artillery regiment (620 men; 30 122mm D-30 howitzers; six 122mm BM-21 *Grad* truck-mounted multiple-rocket launchers; 21 9K32 *Strela-2/3*; 40 RPG-16), an assault-gun battalion (180 men; 31 ASU-85 self-propelled assault guns; 12 9K32 *Strela-2/3*; two RPG-16), an anti-aircraft battalion (155 men; 12 9K32 *Strela-2/3*; 18 23mm ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft guns), an engineer battalion (220 men; six 9K32 *Strela-2/3*; 12 RPG-16), a signals battalion (180 men), a parachute rigging and resupply battalion (220 men), a transport and maintenance battalion (165 men), a medical battalion (95 men), a reconnaissance company (75 men; six 9K32 *Strela-2/3*; nine RPG-16) and a chemical-protection company (65 men).

A parachute regiment (1,473 men) comprised an HQ (60 men), three parachute battalions, a mortar battery (60 men; six 120mm M1943/M120 mortars; six RPG-16), an ATGM battery (45 men; three 9K32 *Strela-2/3*; nine RPG-16), an anti-aircraft battery (45 men; three 9K32 *Strela-2/3*; six 23mm ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft guns), an engineer company (60 men), a signals company (50 men), a parachute rigging and resupply company (85 men), a transport and maintenance company (65 men) and medical, chemical-protection and supply platoons (55 men).

A parachute battalion (316 men) comprised an HQ (14 men) and three BMD-equipped parachute companies, as well as an air-defence platoon (12 men; nine 9K32 *Strela-2/3* or 9K310 *Igla-1*), a signals platoon (18 men), an automatic-grenade-launcher platoon (22 men; six AGS-17 grenade launchers) and repair, medical and supply troops (25 men).

A parachute company (75 men) was made up of an HQ unit (six men; one BMD) and three platoons (each with 69 men and nine BMDs) each of three squads (seven men and one BMD); aside from the weapon systems integral to their BMD armoured personnel carriers, each squad was armed with one RPKS-74 support weapon and AKS-74 assault rifles.

Though they were similar to the airborne divisions of the VDV (which was also operationally responsible for them), technically both air-assault brigades and airmobile-assault brigades came under the purview of Ground Forces. The main difference between an air-assault brigade and an airmobile-assault brigade was that the latter had no integral BMDs, and was thus a smaller and much lighter force.

An air-assault brigade (*Desantnaya Shturmvaya Brigada*) (2,000–2,600 all ranks) comprised an HQ, two air-assault battalions, two parachute battalions, a reconnaissance company, a composite artillery battalion (12–18 122mm D-30 howitzers; six 122mm BM-21 *Grad* truck-mounted multiple-rocket launchers), an air-defence artillery battery, engineer, signals, parachute rigging and resupply, transport and maintenance and supply companies, plus a chemical-protection platoon and medical platoon. Air-assault brigades had no organic helicopter transport capacity, and would need to rely on VVS Frontal Aviation units; a full air-assault brigade, including BMDs, would require around 40 Mi-8 sorties and 125 Mi-6 'Hook'/Mi-26 'Halo' heavy-transport helicopter sorties to deliver the entire force (Zaloga 1985: 22).

An air-assault battalion comprised an HQ, three assault companies, a mortar battery (eight 120mm M1943/M120 mortars), an air-defence platoon (12 men; nine 9K32 *Strela-2/3* or 9K310 *Igla-1*), and an automatic-grenade-launcher platoon (22 men; six AGS-17 grenade launchers).

A parachute battalion comprised an HQ, three parachute companies, a mortar battery (eight 120mm M1943/M120 mortars), an air-defence platoon (12 men; nine 9K32 *Strela-2/3* or 9K310 *Igla-1*), an anti-tank platoon (six 9K111 *Fagot* ATGMs; three 73mm SPG-9 recoilless guns), and an automatic-grenade-launcher platoon (22 men; six AGS-17 grenade launchers).

An airmobile-assault brigade (1,700–1,850 men) comprised an HQ, three parachute battalions/airmobile-assault battalions (the same ToE as the parachute battalion in the air-assault brigade), a howitzer battery, an air-defence artillery battery, an anti-tank missile battery, reconnaissance, engineer, signals, transport, and supply and maintenance companies, a chemical-protection platoon and medical platoon. In addition a transport helicopter regiment would be attached (24 Mi-6/Mi-26 heavy-lift helicopters; 32 Mi-8 medium-lift helicopters).

Mujahideen

The informal tribal nature of the Afghan resistance meant that at the outset of the war there was no comparable military organization to that fielded by the Soviet forces or the DRA. Resistance was organized firstly through the *qawm*, augmented by varying levels of local political activity; as the war progressed more consistent formations emerged, with a corresponding rise in professionalism. In the north-western regions the resistance was modelled on the DRA, with a mixture of local defence troops augmented by (theoretically) mobile offensive forces, the basic formation of which was the *ghund* (regiment) of 600–900 men, made up of three *kundak* (battalions), each of three *tulay* (companies), though the traditional basic group of around 25 fighters proved consistently popular and naturally effective (Roy 1986: 180–81).

In Panjshir, which saw some of the most intense and protracted fighting of the war, the system was known as the *qarargah*, within which there were groups responsible for the general protection of a given local area known as *mahalli*, the elite members of which were gathered into a 'shock troop' unit 33-strong called the *grup-i zarbati* (one for each base) that provided the first line of defence in the event of an attack. In addition there were mobile guerrilla groups, known as *grup-i-mutaharek*, who were also organized into 33-strong units, but who would range up to 100km from their base of operations (Roy 1986: 181–82). Overall the variations in the scope, ability and nature of the resistance in differing regions was often considerable, and even within the same region there could be real disparities between groups depending on how close they were to the enemy, or how often they were in combat.

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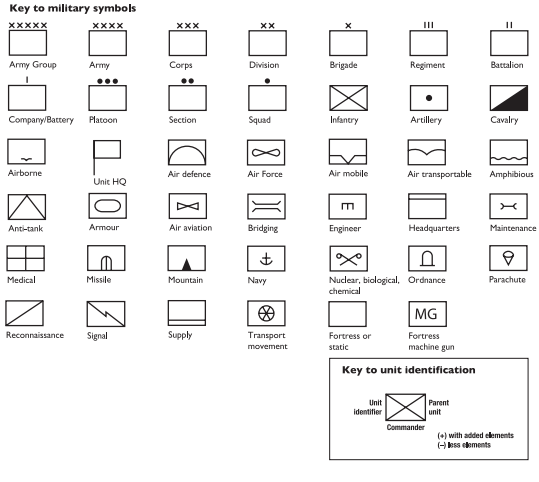

Dedication

To Jon Fenton, who really ought to read my books but doesn't.

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Comparative ranks

US Army (NATO code)	**Sovetskaya Armiya (Soviet Army)**
General of the Armies (OF-10)	*Marshal Sovetskogo Soyuza* (Marshal of the Soviet Union)
General (OF-9)	*general armii* (General of the Army)
(no equivalent)	*general-polkovnik* (Colonel General)
Lieutenant General (OF-8)	*general-leytenant*
Major General (OF-7)	*general-mayor*
Brigadier General (OF-6)	(no equivalent)
Colonel (OF-5)	*polkovnik*
Lieutenant Colonel) (OF-4)	*podpolkovnik*
Major (OF-3)	*mayor*
Captain (OF-2)	*kapitan*
First Lieutenant (OF-1)	*starshiy leytenant* (Senior Lieutenant)
Second Lieutenant (OF-1)	*leytenant* (Lieutenant)
(no equivalent)	*mladshiy leytenant* (Junior Lieutenant)
Command Sergeant Major (OR-9a)	*starshiy praporshchik* (Senior Warrant Officer)
Sergeant Major (OR-9b)	*praporshchik* (Warrant Officer)
First Sergeant (OR-8)	*starshina* (Sergeant Major)
Sergeant First Class (OR-7)	*starshiy serzhant* (Senior Sergeant)
Staff Sergeant (OR-6)	*serzhant* (Sergeant)
Sergeant (OR-5)	(no equivalent)
Corporal/Specialist (OR-4)	*mladshiy serzhant* (Junior Sergeant)
Private First Class (OR-3)	(no equivalent)
Private E-2 (OR-2)	*yefreytor* (Senior Private)
Private E-1 (OR-1)	*ryadovoy* (Private)